

FRIENDS OF BURMA NEWSLETTER

June, 2008

When this newsletter was planned we had no idea that the entire world would be focused on Burma (Myanmar) in the last several weeks. As we get emails and other communications in these difficult times, every day brings new information. We are struggling to get relief money to Burma while still maintaining our programs mentioned later in this newsletter.



Cyclone Nargis was what we would call a hurricane here in the United States. Nothing comparable to the strength of this storm has hit in Burma in over 100 years. Various reports tell of walls of water from 12 – 17 feet high! There is no history of dealing with this kind of devastation, and we know from news reports that there does not seem to be governmental desire to do all things possible for the victims.

Some of what follows was sent to us before **Cyclone Nargis** and will probably not reflect new priorities. That is not because the stated priority is invalid, but because new buildings probably have to be put on hold in order to repair old buildings that lost roofs. New programs may have to be put on hold in order to serve the dire needs of people displaced by the cyclone and facing desperate needs for medical aid, food, water and shelter. The immediately following information focuses on the current situation.

Myanmar Institute of Theology.

At Insein trees were downed all over the campus that houses MIT as well as the **Karen Baptist Theological Seminary, the Myanmar Institute of Christian Theology, and the Karen Clinic**. In some cases the trees struck houses causing significant damage. Roofs were damaged either by wind or by trees. MIT experienced significant damage to the roofs of their four-story Jubilee building, the library, the women's and men's hostels, and staff quarters. Many of the professors' offices were damaged and their personal books lost. Library books also were spoiled by rain when the roof was blown off. The 14 desk top computers in the computer lab were all ruined.

The staff determined that they would reopen on June 1. Immediate needs include

- Clear the many large uprooted trees.
- Replace roofs and many broken windows.
- Provide for electricity connection to the main generator since other electricity is not available.
- Replace the computers in the computer lab so the BARS

Special Relief Contributions may be sent to

1) Friends of Burma at 548 Home Avenue, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46807

Email to

neildianasowards@juno.com; telephone 260-745-3658

Website:

www.friendsofburma.org

2) Myanmar Burma Relief Organization at P.O. Box 26407, Scottsdale, AZ 85255

Email to

admin.logistics@MyanmarBurmaRelief.org

Website:

www.myanmarburmarelief.org

(MBRO is related to Friends of Burma)

- program in Computer Science can continue.
- Secure funds for the diesel fuel needed to run the generator. The price for diesel has skyrocketed to over \$10.00 per gallon.
- Secure funds for the rapidly rising cost of food. The fees for food have already been raised by 60 % and cannot be raised again. Rice has more than doubled in price and continues to go up.
- Secure assistance for the cost of medical care for students and the entire school community.

The immediate dollar need is estimated to be about \$45,000 to begin school and keep MIT open for this term. The school is expecting a visit from the accrediting team for Asian Theological Schools in August and in the midst of this devastation needs to be preparing for that visit as well.

Other Seminaries and Bible Schools

Myanmar Institute for Christian Theology, the Burmese language Bible school, has decided to push back the opening date of the 2008-2009 academic years to September because of need for building repairs, lack of electricity, water and the rising costs of food.

Pwo Karen Seminary in Alone has many displaced persons living there at this time. We have not received word on their reopening date

The Karen Baptist Theological Seminary, on the same campus as MIT and MICT, has had similar damage and faces similar needs. Currently they have four areas of study in their Bachelor of Arts degree program – Business Administration, Computer Science, Communicative English and Karen Language. The first three are four year programs and the last one, a new program is a three-year course of study. Of course, their seminary training track continues as it always has.

What the enrollment will be this year is still uncertain, but in the last academic year the Bachelor of Arts program in three areas of study had close to 200 students. The Business Administration course began in 2005 and the Computer Science course began in 2004 so neither has yet a full complement of classes.

The **Pwo Karen Seminary** and **Bible School** in Pathein were very severely affected. May 3 and 4, most students lost family members; two students died while home in their villages. The buildings are now being used to assist displaced persons, because many people have nowhere else to turn. A recent report cited 2000 survivors living in Ko Tha Byu seminary camp with more arriving every day.

Myanmar Baptist Convention

The convention office suffered significant damage to the building along with the loss of computers and supplies. Their estimated need for building repair and replacement of office necessities is about \$100,000. They are working hard to assist refugee relief in whatever way they can. They work in cooperation with the Myanmar Council of Churches, the Karen Baptist Convention and the Pwo Karen Baptist Conference doing the ground level relief work.

The Delta Area

Several reports have come to us about the delta area. The Karen Baptist Convention, the Pwo Karen Baptist Conference, the Myanmar Baptist Churches Union, and the Asho Chin Baptist Convention were the hardest hit in the delta area. Estimates of 40,000 homeless are under girded by the fact that there are over 10,000

people in camps being serviced by Baptist Associations in the Delta Area. In some cases most of the churches in an area have been destroyed. Many pastors died. One list identified 100 churches lost.

The needs are overwhelming. Rev, Honor Nyo, immediate past General Secretary of the Karen Baptist Convention, writes that people are not only suffering from malnutrition and dehydration, but also from depression, hopelessness, grief and general trauma. Their urgent physical needs, which the Baptist Conventions are trying to meet, are rice, pure water, salt, medicine, mosquito nets, clothes and shelter from the heavy rain. The thatch and bamboo natural building materials were destroyed further complicating reconstruction in many areas. Below is a recent communication from him.



Here are some personal stories

“On May 7-11 (after Nargis cyclone struck the delta areas) I went back to my village, but didn’t find any houses, church, Assembly Hall, clinic, and trees. My village was completely wiped out by this violent and severe cyclone. My own 2 sisters (68 & 70), my brother-in-law, a niece, a grandson (2 ½ years old, my nephew’s son), and many other relatives died with our 60 villagers/church members. By the Grace of God my brother (Donor Nyo) the pastor of Kannyinaung Karen Baptist Church, (my mother church), and my other 2 sisters were miraculously alive and well.

After visiting my church, I went to other Karen villages and saw the same thing happened to them. This terrible cyclone killed not less than 60,000 persons in Laputta, Bokalay, and Pypon Townships. I think not less that 5,000 Karen Baptist died and over 20,000 victims are homeless now. We bought back (154) person to the Pathein Refugee Camp. At Ko Tha Byu Bible School, now we have 3,000 homeless people. The Pathein Myaungmya Karen Baptist Association must shoulder all the expenses for food, shelters, medicines, clothes, comfort and encouragement. The remnant are now suffering from grief, trauma, frustration, hopelessness, mental disorders, diarrhea, and depression. Now we have many orphans, widows, sick people, and dependent old people.

The needs are enormous and wide. God alone can fulfill the needs of these desperate victims. Please remember them in your prayer and look for some ways and means to help meet the needs of our brothers and sisters who are camping in Pathein, Yangon, Yedwinyegan, Myaungmya, and those who are remaining in the desolated villages. To do reconstruction or rehabilitation is not an easy task. When I was there, the plant called “thatch” were totally destroyed. These plants are used for roofing and walling. Since the salty waters flooded all their rice fields and almost all the cattle died, cultivating their paddy fields and growing rice again is a very big problem. May God use you to help meet some of their needs.

Together in building His Kingdom in Burma,

Yours in His service, Honor Nyo.

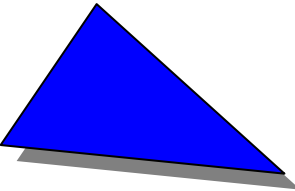
This word comes from Saw Htaw Plaw Htoo, a Karen currently living and working in Chiang Mai, Thailand

On the good side, the Karen Baptist Convention (KBC) bought two tractors for villagers so that they can start cultivating in time. The rice season begins as monsoon season starts this month. As part of a resettlement plan, KBC plans to buy four to six more tractors since all livestock, including oxen and water buffalos used in cultivating, were destroyed during the cyclone. Local donors and aid agencies are delivering rice seeds. A tractor cost about \$600. I will be sending more money and medicine next week.

A Burmese owned airline, Air Mandalay, which has been letting people carry more than the weight limit due to the cyclone, postponed all flight from Chiang Mai to Rangoon for no reason. So all my packages will have to go through Bangkok and will be lesser due to weight limit. Please continue to pray for the people and the country.

Finally this word from Saw Htoo

There was a tornado touch-down in Rangoon on June 1st with about 1000 ft radius. About 200 houses were destroyed.



Here is a report that tells a personal story. It is particularly important because it confirms other stories of discrimination in giving aid.

I just want you to know about Kathamyin, my village where I grew up is in Delta. Kathamyin. It is a Karen village. It was damaged by the Cyclone, but not totally wiped out. The relief team went and told them that they are not desperate. In the same area there is a Burmese village, the Government left all the goods with the Burmese village, but for Kathamyin each get one teaspoon full of salt and 4 potatoes, and a few worn out clothes which they cannot use.

My family and I are trying to help them now. It is not easily accessible so it is hard to get news from them. Most of the houses' roofs are gone and all their livestock are dead, because the water rose to 5ft. Most of the paddy are wet and they have no diesel to grind them into rice so they can eat. They were trying to build a new Church. It was not complete, and now is damaged by the cyclone. The old church is not safe. I do not know what they are going to do.

Well I do not want to add more sad news. I am sure you had enough.

In all of this, those delivering the aid need our prayers for safety and emotional stamina along with no harassment from officials.

Immediately the need is for food, pure water and shelter. Later, as noted above, there will be a need for seed to plant rice along with tools and farm animals to cultivate the crops, nets for fishing, and boats to use for transport and fishing. Flooding from salty sea water may diminish the rice crop for years to come.

Another great need is **care for orphaned children**. Already many have been placed in homes in Yangon and other less affected areas. The Christian Karen are very concerned that none of these children end up in government camps where there is fear that they may be abused and exploited. **Obviously Friends of Burma must now find more orphan sponsors at \$180 per year.**

Finally, a deep concern is the need to secure permits to build churches destroyed by the cyclone. Getting permission to build a church has been very difficult in the past. Many requests have been turned down by authorities. Construction costs will be very high because of the tremendous demand for materials.

FRIENDS OF MYANMAR GOVERNING BOARD

A communication from Saw Say Plah, one of the members of the Friends of Myanmar Governing Board tells us that they held an emergency meeting on June 2nd in Yangon. Six of the members were able to be present. They determined that Rev. Greeta Din, the current general secretary of the Karen Baptist Convention, would take the position of Chairperson. The following items were identified as crucial needs:

- 1. Rolls of Plastic (5,000 yards)**
- 2. Mosquito nets (locally made) (3,000)**
- 3. Torch lights (3,000)**
- 4. Bibles (There is a possibility that the Gideons will provide 10,000 copies of NT& Psalms)**
- 5. Guitars (300)**
- 6. Ks 30,000 scholarships for 100 storm victims (Bible school students)**
- 7. Low cost housing for the 250 pastors whose houses were totally destroyed.**
- 8. 8 boats with Chinese diesel engine to distribute foods and supplies to the remote storm hit area @ 20 lakh each.**

Friends of Burma has released \$20,000 from its reserve for immediate relief to the Karen Baptist Convention in Burma. Most of the victims are Karen. We hope donations will be forthcoming and we can give another \$20,000. A report from a reliable source says over 10,000 Baptists were killed and over 200 churches and villages were destroyed.

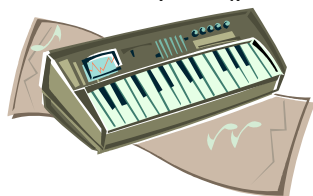


REPORTS FROM BEFORE CYCLONE NARGIS

Guitars and Keyboards

There is a great demand for musical items in the churches. No doubt many were lost in the storm and will need to be replaced.

Our last report (pre Nargis) identified 32 keyboards distributed to Bible Schools, Christian centers, a few churches and the BARS music program. These are good condition used keyboards with stand, case and useable with battery power. The requests were many and will no doubt rise now.



Guitars given out are also purchased with an eye to economy and quality. The Friends of Myanmar Governing Board members are very careful to use the money given in the most effective manner. The demand for guitars has risen greatly since Nargis. This is a way to restore some normalcy as people praise God together.

A related need that has been expressed is to have books that would help people with music lessons. This need is still not met.

Books Project

2000 Zondervan Bible Dictionaries were given to all the Bible Schools.

2000 Summarized Bibles were distributed to all Bible Schools and all language and regional conventions. There were 1000 copies left to be distributed this year and will no doubt be necessary to replace some which were damaged or lost.



The book "Where There is No Doctor" is still in great demand. It has been distributed recently through the women's department of the Pathein Myaung Mya Sgaw Karen Baptist Association. It is given to the 30 – 40 young women from rural villages that each year are taught midwifery and disease prevention information. The books are also given to frontier evangelists working in Kayin and Mon State as well as workers in the Delta. The Christian Education department would like to give the book to Sunday School teachers and other Christian leaders too. The books cost about \$3.00 a copy and have proven to be very useful to all who received them. A recent request for 550 more books has been received. The need is ongoing!

Other projects are still being pursued including youth hymnals and theological books.



University Christian Fellowship in Pathein

This new building was dedicated in January. This center serves as a hostel and worship center for university students. Last year they had an average of 80 - 90 students at worship each Sunday. There were 27 students in residence but also two groups of 30 distance learning students came to use the facility when they came for intensive study and examinations. A full-time pastor, Thra Saw Ku Ku, serves at this site.

Eye Glasses

Eye Glasses are often too expensive for most people. Pictured are some MIT staff people who recently received glasses via our eye glasses program. Through specific contributions FOB has been contributing the \$12 cost for eye exams and glasses for students and others.



Aid to Aging Church Workers



Retired pastors and other church workers have no source of income and must rely on their families who often are needy themselves. Monies from FOB are allotted and distributed at the discretion of various convention leaders. Here is a picture of Saw Moo who could not sit or stand by himself. He was diabetic and lost his eyesight. Still he attended Sunday services and even once gave a benediction with his sons helping him to stand. His heart continued to be on the mission fields and in the villages. A small grant was given to him as a love gift from Friends of Burma and this picture accompanied a letter of grateful thanks. (Since we received this note he has gone to a MUCH BETTER place!)

Another recipient of these grants is a 71 year old retired school teacher from Pathein. Eileen Ba Tu is a widow of thirty years and has recently suffered from an emotional breakdown and has a broken hand. The \$1.50 grant to retired church workers gave her much joy and a feeling of not being forgotten. FOB tries to give up to \$12.00 per person but the amount is left to the discretion of the leaders.



Scholarships

The scholarships that are given through the Sowards Scholarship program continue to enable for large numbers of students to study at Bible Schools and Seminaries. The scholarships target children of Christian workers and others with high potential who come from poor families.

Pictured here are four such scholarship students from the Ko Tha Byu Seminary in Pathein. This same seminary is mentioned above as being a housing and feeding site for displaced persons now. Many others of the 360 students helped in the past year have sent thank you notes. There is always a need for this kind of aid.

CONGRATULATIONS AND THANKS



Our faithful assistant in Yangon, Daw Sung Cer, thanks to special assistance, was able to attend the May graduation of her daughter, Nancy, from Earlham College.



Sung has worked to assist Friends of Burma for years at no small cost to herself. Friends of Burma depends heavily upon Sung, a dedicated and trusted worker. Here are two pictures at graduation. One features Sung and the other Nancy.

Congratulations to Nancy-- the first ever Burmese to graduate from Earlham.

MINISTRIES IN THE UNITED STATES

There are Karen ministries springing up in many places. The following are areas where some Friends of Burma board members are involved.

In Fort Wayne, Indiana, the work with refugees continues. Here is Diana Sowards who currently works with a large, fatherless family. The father is still in Thailand and has not received permission to come to the United States. Karen families are assigned to American families, called "Friendship Families", who are willing to do something every month to enhance their life. Examples are taking them to parades, swimming, making cookies, etc. They also take them to doctor's appointments.



The Karen Baptist Church of Western Chicago, now celebrating a one year anniversary reaches Karens, many of whom travel a considerable distance to attend each Sunday to join in the fellowship which has grown to about 80. In Moline, Illinois, a worship service in the Karen language has been started with about 30 to 50 in attendance. New families are arriving every week so the potential for growth is great. They currently worship with the First Baptist Church of Moline.

Phoenix, Arizona continues to be a site of great activity with Burmese refugees. June 7th Burmese pastors from around the United States gathered to develop continuing support for each other and new churches that are forming as refugees continue to flow into the U.S. Twenty Karens attended the ABC Mission Conference in Cincinnati, Ohio. They are net-working and hope to develop a Karen Baptist Convention within the American Baptist Convention within three years. They are also developing a nation-wide Karen Women's Association.