
Nuns and Buddhist monks are helping the people of Mandalay. The country is facing hunger and fear

The Coronavirus outbreak was followed by a military coup, hunger threat, and insecurity. There is no peace in Myanmar. "The plight of the local population precipitated after the military coup on February 1st," Sister **Lucia Aung**, of the Order of St Joseph of the Apparition in Mandalay, told SIR. "People are under constant tension and fear. They feel unsafe even in their homes because they can be arrested and shot at any moment." Cardinal Charles Bo, Archbishop of Yangon, president of the Bishops' Conference, voiced these concerns in his homily on the occasion of Divine Mercy Sunday. "Millions of people in Myanmar are starving," he said. 17 percent of Burmese households were severely food insecure before the outbreak of the coronavirus. One year later, according to figures released by the World Bank, this percentage had risen to 62%. The emergency was exacerbated by the coup. People are afraid, they are traumatised. They need words of comfort. On that occasion, the cardinal asked for good deeds to be done "today and everywhere", and the nuns responded to his appeal, jointly coordinating efforts in a spirit of communion with the local Buddhist monks. Everything began on April 3rd when the military set fire to a Muslim compound where they assumed activists were hiding. People were stranded in the streets with their properties burnt down. The nuns, together with the monks, went out to bring food and comfort to the affected community, and since then they continue helping the poorest families, distributing food parcels and bringing consolation to those who lost family members during the protests. "We are a group of 15 Buddhist monks and seven nuns. Five Muslim and Hindu brothers and sisters have also joined us," Sister Lucia said. "We posted photos of our efforts on our Facebook page to show people that we are ONE and we are with our people. Many people have learnt about our activities, contacted us and offered their help." **Sister Lucia, how serious is the hunger emergency?** We don't have accurate figures to determine the exact number of people who will suffer from hunger in the future, but based on our own experience and on the situation we are seeing here, I think that if this revolution continues, many people will be facing serious financial problems that could lead to food shortages and destitution. Prices are steadily rising. Households with family members in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) have been forced to move out of government-sponsored housing. They are very hard to reach and help. However, we have found a way to get in touch with them even though we cannot give details for safety reasons. **What is the current political climate in the country?** Our brethren, the Buddhist monks in Mandalay, have been demonstrating every day since the coup. They never stopped and are continuing. It is very dangerous and even the monks have to flee when the military strike against them. If they don't run away, protesters are arrested and brought to prison, and no one knows what happens there. Sometimes, the military and the police charge as much as 200 dollars to release people from prison. **Are you scared? Do you feel safe?** Not even members of religious orders are safe. They could enter the monastery at night, raid every place without permission and shoot, destroying everything in their path. They are carrying guns, so everyone is required to be careful at all times. Whoever took pictures or videos of the protest, or posted anti-coup material on their Facebook account, will have their phone scanned and confiscated. **Given this dangerous situation, why have you Sisters decided to step out and assist the population?** Because many of our fellow citizens are sacrificing their lives for the good and the future of our country. We cannot remain silent. We also wish to do our part by remaining vigilant. This is not easy, but we thank God for this opportunity to join efforts with the members of other faiths.

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