
Myanmar: attack against yet another church in Kayah State as people are fleeing, leaving deserted towns behind

Fortunately, there was no major damage this time. However, the last incident indicates that military violence against civilians in Myanmar is continuing and is not sparing places of worship, parishes and churches throughout the country, where women, the elderly and children fleeing their homes often take shelter. According to reports received last night by SIR, complete with photos, St Joseph's Catholic Church in the city of Demoso, 16 kilometres from Loikaw, Kayah State, was attacked with heavy weapons amidst violent clashes between the army of the military junta and civil resistance fighters. The church is the second Catholic church to be attacked after the Sacred Heart parish in Kayanthayar village, in the Loikaw area. The city of Loikaw is deserted. Photos taken by Fr Francis Soe Naing depict completely empty streets. "They were taken at 10am and there is no one to be seen," the priest said. *"Our city is a frightening place to be now. It is totally shrouded in silence."* **As the fighting intensifies, increasing numbers of people are leaving their homes for safety reasons.** "We met them on the street while delivering basic necessities to an IDP camp in the village of Yusomoso, inside the Church compound," Father Francis said. "Reaching the camp via the main road is unsafe. So we decided to take a path through the jungle. We saw many people leaving their homes. They were coming from Donganrao village, very close to Deemoso, where fighting has been ongoing since May 21. I don't know where they are heading to. It would seem that they are travelling to distant areas. In fact, no place is safe in Kayah State." Loikaw is 16 kilometres away from Deemoso. The priest reported incessant warfare, although he was not sure which weapons were being fired. The fact is that many houses have been destroyed. Luckily no one was injured because there is no one left in the villages and surrounding districts. Everyone has fled. The impact of the 'de facto' civil war on the country's impoverished economy is also of concern. *"Agriculture is the prime means of livelihood for most of the people living in this region. We are extremely worried. Should this situation continue for another few months, thereby preventing rice cultivation, we will all die of hunger."* **Church support to the local population.** There are currently 20 IDP camps in the diocese run by the Catholic Church of Loikaw, with about 60,000 displaced people who found protection and shelter there. "During the last two months, we created the Diocesan Relief Committee involving priests, doctors, nurses and volunteers to provide humanitarian support and assistance to the refugees. UNHCR, Caritas Loikaw (KMSS-Loikaw), Myanmar medical organisations and other donors are major contributors." Relief items being distributed include rations of rice, pasta, salt, biscuits, etc., medicines, blankets, mosquito nets, mats and tents. Cardinal Charles Bo launched an appeal from Yangon a few days ago, primarily in favour of refugees. "There are many children and elderly people among them, starving and without any medical aid. It's a serious humanitarian tragedy." The Sacred Heart Church in Kayanthayar was also the target of an attack that left four people dead. "Let us remember the blood that is spilled is not some enemy's blood; those who died and those who were wounded are the citizens of this country. They were not armed; they were inside the church to protect their families. Every heart in this country weeps for the death of the innocent people." "More than 20,000 have been displaced in the recent conflict in Loikaw. This needs to stop. We plead with you all, stop the war. "

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