



Burma (Myanmar)

Introduction

Official Name: Union of Burma

Nationality: Burmese

Area: 678,500 square kilometers (261,970 square miles)

Languages: Burmese, minority ethnic languages

Currency: kyat (MMK)

Location: Southeast Asia, bordered by Bangladesh, China, India, Laos, and Thailand with coastline on the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal

Note: Since 1989, the ruling military junta has promoted the name Myanmar, but that name has not been approved by any Burmese legislature. The United States legally recognizes the country under the name of Burma.

Statistical Information

Population	47.4 million
0-14 years	26.1 percent
15-64 years	68.6 percent
65+ years	5.3 percent
Birth rate	17 births/1,000
Death rate	9 deaths/1,000
Fertility rate	2 children/woman
Pop. growth rate	0.815 percent
Life expectancy	62.5 years
Literacy	89.9 percent
HIV/AIDS rate	1.2 percent
Below poverty line	25 percent
Ethnic groups	68 percent Burman 9 percent Shan 7 percent Karen 4 percent Rakhine 2 percent Mon 10 percent other (includes Chinese and Indian)
Religion	84 percent Buddhist 8 percent Christian 4 percent Muslim 1 percent animist 3 percent other

Economy

Burma is a resource-rich country, but its economy is poor. It suffers from restrictive government controls, inefficient economic policies, fiscal instability, corruption, and rising inflation. Poverty is widespread in rural areas. The economy struggles with macroeconomic imbalances including multiple official exchange rates which destabilize the kyat, fiscal deficits, and an inability to reconcile various national records. Burma lost most of its overseas developmental aid after the military junta began to suppress the democracy movement in 1988 and refused to honor the legislative elections of 1990. The U.S. imposed economic sanctions on Burma in 2003 following a government attack on opposition party leader Aung San Suu Kyi. Most recently, the September 2007 government attacks on pro-democracy demonstrators, including thousands of Buddhist monks, prompted further sanctions. The United Nations banned investment and trade in Burmese timber, gems, and precious stones in October 2007, and the U.S. expanded its sanctions list to include Burmese government and military officials and their families as well as prominent pro-junta businessmen and related companies.

Government

Capital: Rangoon (Naypyidaw is the administrative capital)

Burma is governed by a military junta. The chief of state is Chairman of the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) Sr. Gen. Than Shwe, and the prime minister is Lt. Gen. Thein Sein. The cabinet is overseen by the SPDC. There have been no successful elections since 1988, when the military junta took power under the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). The legislative branch theoretically consists of the unicameral People's Assembly, or *Pyithu Hluttaw*, whose 458 members are elected by popular vote to serve four-year terms. Following the last legislative

election in 1990, the military junta refused to allow the newly elected legislature to convene, and it has been powerless ever since.

Climate

Burma has a tropical monsoon climate. It experiences hot, cloudy, humid, rainy summers during the southwest monsoon from June to September; winters are less cloudy, with little rainfall, milder temperatures, and lower humidity during the northeast monsoon from December to April.

Environmental Concerns

Deforestation creates problems in Burma, as do air, water, and soil pollution. The country's inadequate systems of sanitation and water treatment contribute heavily to Burma's high degree of risk for infectious disease.

History

The early history of Burma is mainly the story of the power struggle between the ethnic Burmans and the Mons, also known as the Talaings. In 1044, King Anawratha of the Burmans gained supremacy over the Mon capital city of Thaton and over the Ayeyarwady delta. He adopted Theravada Buddhism from the Mons, and established his capital city of Pagan, or "the city of a thousand temples."

In 1287, Kublai Khan conquered the Burman kingdom. In its absence, Shan princes gained strength in northern Burma, while the Mon people rebuilt their influence in the south.

Under the Toungoo dynasty, the Burmans united the country in the 16th century, subjugating the Shans. In the 18th century, the Mons began to expand out of the south, challenging Burman supremacy. Burman ruler Alaungapaya led the Burmans to victory, destroying the Mon kingdom. He founded the Konbaung dynasty and established his capital at Yangon, which is present-day Rangoon. Alaungapaya extended Burmese influence over parts of India and Thailand, but friction developed between the Burmese and the British over border areas in India.

At the conclusion of the third Anglo-Burman war in 1885 (the first two were in 1824 and 1852), Britain captured the Burmese king, gained complete control of Burma, and made the country part of British India. Under British rule, rice cultivation was expanded, a railroad network was constructed, and Burma's natural resources were exploited, including oil and metal ore deposits.

In 1923, a system of diarchy was implemented, which allowed for a partially elected Burmese legislature. The British created a constitution for Burma, which went into effect in 1937. This constitution separated the country from British India and provided for a fully elected assembly and cabinet.

During World War II, the Japanese occupied Burma. They set up a native Burman regime under Dr. Ba Maw. Members of the Burmese Independent Army formed an anti-Japanese movement under Aung San known as the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, or AFPFL. Allied forces drove the Japanese out of Burma in April of 1945.

In 1947, Aung San and the AFPFL reached an agreement with the British on Burmese independence. Aung San was assassinated in July, but the agreement still went into effect in 1948, making Burma an independent republic. Areas with non-Burman majorities were organized as the semi-autonomous states of Shan, Kachin, Kayin, Kayah, and Chin.

The new government, controlled by the socialist AFPFL, soon faced threats from Communist supporters and from the Karin tribespeople, who wanted complete autonomy. Tensions were compounded by the presence of Chinese Nationalist troops who had been forced over the border by Chinese Communists in 1950. Burma appealed to the United Nations for help, and in 1953 the U.N. ordered the Nationalists out of Burma.

The AFPFL continued to dominate the government until it split into two factions in 1958, causing the beginning of a breakdown in order. Premier U Nu invited General Ne Win, head of the Burmese army, to take over the government and restore order. Ne Win returned the government to U Nu in 1960, but continued minority rebellions opened the door to a military coup in 1962.

Ne Win seized power and established the Revolutionary Council, made up of military leaders who ruled by decree. The Myanmar Socialist Program party was made the only legal political party. The industrial and commercial sectors of the economy were placed under government control, and the government followed a policy of international isolation.

Various insurgent groups began to gain strength during the Ne Win regime. Pro-Chinese Communist rebels were active in northern Burma, receiving aid

from Communist China after 1967, and the Shan, Karin, and Kachin minorities formed their own insurgency movements. By the early 1970s, various powerful insurgent groups controlled roughly one-third of the country. Economic troubles and ethnic tensions continued, leading to the antigovernment riots of 1988, which caused Nu Win to resign.

The military seized power in 1988 under the name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). In 1989, the military junta changed the name of the country to Myanmar, an adaptation of the local name for the country, Myanma Naingngandaw, but the name change has not been approved by any democratic Burmese legislature, and is not considered legitimate by the United States.

Legislative elections were held in 1990, and the National League for Democracy (NLD) won a large majority of seats in the People's Assembly. The military junta refused to hand over power, declared the election results invalid, and arrested many leaders of the NLD. Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the NLD, had been under house arrest since 1989.

In 1992, General Than Shwe became head of the junta and assumed the position of prime minister. He released political prisoners and lifted martial law decrees, but stopped short of making plans to return the government to civilian control. A U.N. General Assembly committee condemned the Burmese military government for its refusal to hand power to a democratically elected legislature.

During the 1990s, the government signed cease-fire agreements with most of the insurgent minority groups, with the exception of the Karen. Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 1995 and immediately returned to her activities as an opposition leader; the government continued to harass her and her followers.

In 1996, Khun Saa, a powerful drug lord and leader of a private insurgent army, surrendered and allowed government troops to enter his jungle stronghold. It was strongly suspected that the government granted him amnesty and allowed him to continue his drug activities unmolested in return for ending his insurgency.

In 1997, the SLORC changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). It launched a major campaign against Karen insurgents along the Thailand border. Numerous abuses were reported by human-rights groups, including arrests of trade union members, the use of ethnic minorities as forced

laborers, and harassment of opposition leaders and members.

The SPDC placed Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest again from 2000 to 2002. When she was released in 2002, her supporters hoped the SPDC was changing its attitude, but compromise talks did not proceed as expected. She continued to be outspoken in her criticism of the SPDC, and in May 2003 her motorcade was attacked. The government blamed the violence on her supporters, and placed her and other NLD leaders back under house arrest. Increasing pressure from international sanctions and condemnations led the government to free many NLD leaders in November.

In February of 2005, the government arrested leaders of the Shan minority on charges of treason. The Shan resumed their insurgency and declared Shan State independent in May, ending the 1995 cease-fire.

The government accused the NLD of having ties to terrorist groups in April 2006, a charge denied by NLD leaders. In 2007, the International Committee of the Red Cross publicly criticized the military government for major human rights abuses.

Ethnic Groups

Ethnic Burmans form 68 percent of the total population of Burma. Burmans are of East Asian descent, and usually have darker skin and straight black hair. Most Burmans are Theravada Buddhists. They speak the Burmese language, the national language of Burma. Burmans traditionally wear different types of sarongs, and may wear gold jewelry and silk scarves on formal occasions. Talismanic tattoos and long hair tied in a knot were traditional among Burman men, but have fallen out of fashion since World War II. Burmans of both genders and all ages wear *thanaka*, a yellowish-white cosmetic paste made from ground wood. Thanaka is usually worn on the face, although some Burman women wear it on their arms. Rites of passage have cultural significance for the Burman people; they include *shinbyu*, an initiation ceremony for Buddhist boys, and *na htwin*, an ear-piercing ceremony for girls.

The Shan live on the Shan plateau, in the Shan state of Burma. They speak the Shan language and are either traditional animists or Theravada Buddhists. The Shan are traditionally rice-growers, shopkeepers, and artisans. The Shan State Army is in a state of warfare against the Burmese Army. During guerilla raids, the Shan are often burned out of their villages and forced to flee to Thailand, where they do not receive refugee status. Young Shan men who choose

to remain in Burma face the possibility that the Burmese government will impress them into service in the Burmese Army or enslave them as laborers on road work projects for months at a time without food or wages.

The Karin people have been fighting for independence from Burma since January of 1949. The Karin call themselves the Pwa Ka Nyaw Po and were originally refugees from Tibet; they live mostly in the hilly eastern region of Burma, along the Thailand border, in the Karin and Kayah states. Thirty to forty percent of the Karin people are Christian. The Burmese government has been accused of ethnic cleansing and religious suppression with regard to the Karin people. There are three main branches of the Karin language: Sgaw, Pwo, and Pa'o. The three branches are not mutually intelligible.

The Rakhine people live along the coastal areas of Rakhine state. They trace their history back to three thousand years before Christ. The Rakhine people most likely converted to Buddhism during the life of the Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama). They are predominantly Theravada Buddhists, but are influenced by Indian (Mahayana) Buddhism because of their proximity to the Indian subcontinent. Many aspects of Rakhine culture, including music, cuisine, and literature, bear the influence of Indian culture. The Rakhine people have their own language, known as the Rakhine language, which is very similar to and mutually intelligible with standard Burmese.

The Mon people are a small ethnic group whose members live in Mon state. Many ethnic Mons were massacred or fled to Thailand after the final Burman conquest in pre-colonial times. Mons have been fighting against the central Burmese government for years; they desire complete autonomy within Mon state. The Mon people are followers of Theravada Buddhism. Their culture includes spiritual dances and musical instruments such as crocodile xylophones, harps, and flat guitars. Burmese Mon wear clothing similar to ethnic Burmans.

The remainder of Burma's population consists of native Chinese and Indians, along with a multitude of small ethnic groups. Burma recognizes 135 distinct ethnic groups within its borders.

Religion

Around 84 percent of Burmese are Theravadan Buddhists. Theravadan Buddhism is the oldest surviving school of Buddhism. Burma's landscape is dotted with elaborate pagodas and other symbols of Buddhism. Young Burmese boys are expected to

enter the monastery for a short time as a novice monk around the age of seven. Later, around the age of 20, they have the option of becoming a full-fledged monk.

There are small communities of Christians in Burma, mainly among ethnic tribes such as the Karin. Three-quarters of Burma's Christians are Protestants (mostly Baptist), and the remaining quarter are Roman Catholic.

It is estimated that around four percent of the Burmese population is Muslim, mainly of the Sunni sect. There is a history of tension between Muslims and Buddhists in Burma, and anti-Muslim riots erupted in Burma as recently as 2001.

Some native Indians practice Hinduism in Burma, and there are a few Mahayana Buddhists among ethnic Indians living in Burma. Around one percent of the Burmese population still follows traditional animistic beliefs. Some animists combine their traditional beliefs with Theravada Buddhism or even Catholicism.

Culture

Food—Rice is the main dietary staple for most Burmese, except in the highlands where rice is difficult to grow. In the highlands, millet, corn, and sorghum are staples. Rice is usually served with a salad, soup, and curries. Burmese salads are made of leaves, fruits, and vegetables. Curries of fish, prawns, meat, or eggs are seasoned with turmeric, chili powder, or a fermented shrimp or fish paste. The Burmese also eat bamboo shoots and wild greens in addition to cultivated vegetables. Other common foods are lentils, pickled relishes, and *balachaung*, which is made with fried dry prawns. Most meals are eaten with the fingers, although utensils may be used occasionally. Tea is very popular in Burma; the Burmese not only drink tea, they eat a type of pickled tea as a snack. Other snack foods include fried insects and Chinese pastries.

Social status—Poverty is widespread, and there is a drastic line between the rich and poor. Burma's traditional elites are joined by those made rich from smuggling and narcotics. Even the middle class in Burma remains significantly poorer than the wealthy elite. Things such as cellular phones, air conditioning, and computers are available

only to the rich or those with government connections.

Women—In traditional Burmese society, women held a relatively high status. Property was divided equally in the event of divorce, and women were allowed to retain ownership of their wages rather than turning them over to their husbands. The current military government has undermined the role of women, excluding them from higher levels of government and trade, but women remain a significant force in the opposition (pro-democracy) movement.

Marriage—Young Burmese are usually allowed to choose their own marriage partner, although sometimes a matchmaker may be used. If the parents oppose a match, the couple will often elope and then ask their parents again for their blessing. Divorce is relatively common and consists of the couple dividing their possessions and ceasing to live together. It is common for wealthy Burmese men to keep a mistress.

Education—Traditionally, boys were educated in Buddhist monasteries from age eight to 10. That has given way to the public school system, although many boys still receive some schooling at a local monastery. Under the public school system, more girls receive education. Since 1962, the educational system has steadily deteriorated—today more than two thirds of Burmese children drop out of school before the fifth grade. The curriculum is controlled by the military junta, and schools are forbidden to teach in any language but Burmese. Burma has 45 institutions of higher education, but very few Burmese receive degrees because universities and colleges are frequently closed by the government, making serious study difficult. Since students have often been the instigators of antigovernment activities, the military junta has cracked down on students and closed many universities.

Etiquette—It is considered inappropriate to lose one's temper or show strong emotion in public, but the Burmese are generally a very outgoing and friendly people. They will not touch another person's head, since according to Buddhist teaching the head is spiritually the highest part of the body. Thus, patting a child on the head is not only considered inappropriate, but is thought to be harmful to the child. A person should not point their feet at anyone, and should remove his or her

shoes when entering a temple, monastery, or house.

Dress

The traditional dress of the Burmese is a sarong called a *longyi*, worn by both men and women. The longyi is a long length of cloth wrapped around the body; men and women wrap the longyi differently. Men wear the longyi with a short collarless jacket over a white mandarin-collared shirt, and women wear the longyi with a blouse and shawl. In modern times, longyis are often reserved for formal occasions, as young urban Burmese often wear Western skirts and pants.

Travel/Transportation

Roads in the capital city, Rangoon, are in poor condition. Although the amount of traffic is increasing, there is still relatively little congestion even in Rangoon's main streets. Due to heavy pedestrian traffic and animals, bicycles, and slow-moving traffic on the streets, drivers in Burma must be very alert and drive defensively. Outside of Rangoon, most roads are one- or two-lane and are usually unpaved and full of potholes. There are very few streetlights, and many Burmese drivers do not turn on their headlights until it is completely dark, if they use headlights at all. Bicyclists are difficult to see, since very few use reflectors or lights.

Many of the truck drivers en route from China to Rangoon are believed to be under the influence of methamphetamines or other stimulants to enable them to drive long stretches without rest. Drunken or drugged drivers are also common during the four-day Buddhist water festival in April.

Driving is on the right side of the road in Burma; however, many vehicles have the steering wheel positioned on the right side, which can be confusing for foreign drivers. Drivers must always yield to military convoys and motorcades.

Illness/Injury

Medical facilities in Burma are inadequate for even routine care. There are few trained medical personnel. Most medications available in Burma have been smuggled into the country and are most likely counterfeit or adulterated.

The risk for infectious disease in Burma is very high, including not only insect-borne diseases, but also food- and water-borne illnesses. Consult a travel medicine clinic to determine which diseases will pose a threat and how to prevent them.

Crime

Crime rates in Burma are among the lowest in Southeast Asia. Violent crime, especially toward foreigners, is rare. The crime rate has been increasing over the past years due to the poor economic situation of many Burmese citizens.

Safety and Security

Foreigners traveling in Burma should carry their passports and visas, or photocopies of these documents, at all times, in case they are stopped and questioned by the military.

Demonstrations in Burma, even peaceful ones, are always extremely dangerous. The military government prohibits all gatherings of more than five people, and has violently suppressed crowds of demonstrators. In September 2007, the Burmese government used tear gas and gunfire against demonstrators, many of them Buddhist monks. Demonstrators were arrested, jailed, and beaten, and many were killed. Foreigners in Burma should avoid any public gathering or apparent demonstration.

Ethnic rebellions are active along many of Burma's borders with China, Bangladesh, India, and Thailand, especially in Burma's Chin, Shan, Mon, Kayah, and Karin states. Fighting between rebels and government forces can occur at any time.

In 2005, three large bombs exploded in two crowded public shopping areas and an international trade center, killing 20 and wounding hundreds. Since then, several smaller-scale bombings have occurred around the country. The perpetrators have never been identified. Although there is no indication that Westerners are specifically targeted, political unrest continues and foreigners could become unintended victims.

Entry/Exit Requirements

A valid passport and visa are required for entrance into Burma. The government of Burma strictly controls all travel to, from, and within the country, and often prohibits entry or exit at land border crossings, even with a valid visa.

Travelers are required to show their passport and visa at all hotels, train stations, and airports. Military checkpoints are common outside major tourist areas.

Immunizations

Foreigners arriving in Burma from a country where yellow fever is present must present proof of yellow fever inoculation.

Malaria is not a risk in the cities of Rangoon or Mandalay, but travelers who plan to spend any amount of time in rural areas of Burma should take a course of antimalarial drugs. Check with a travel health-care provider to determine which types of antimalarial drugs are most effective for a specific region within Burma. Chloroquine is not an effective antimalarial drug for any region of Burma.

Burma has a high prevalence rate of both hepatitis A and B. Travelers should consider being vaccinated for both strains of hepatitis. Visitors who intend to spend time in rural areas may also wish to request a vaccine for typhoid.

Special Circumstances

Tourists should bring enough cash to cover their expenses for the duration of their stay in Burma. Travelers checks and credit cards are not accepted anywhere in Burma, and ATMs are nonexistent. Foreigners should expect to pay several times more than locals for lodging, domestic airfare, and entrance to tourist sites.

The Burmese government often refuses to issue visas to anyone in an occupation they deem "sensitive," such as journalists. Journalists or writers who travel to Burma on tourist visas are often denied entry, and tourists mistaken for journalists have been harassed. Journalists and writers run the risk of having their notes, film, or cameras confiscated upon leaving the country.

U.S. citizens have been arrested, tried, jailed, and deported for activities including the distribution of pro-democracy literature and visiting the homes of Burmese pro-democracy leaders.

Taking photographs of anything that could be of military or security interest, especially demonstrations or military personnel, will result in problems with the authorities. It is illegal to photograph military installations or personnel in uniform. Americans have been deported for taking sensitive photographs; the Burmese government has informed the U.S. Embassy that in the future it will jail U.S. citizens who take these types of photographs.

Security personnel often place foreigners under surveillance. Possessions in hotel rooms are subject to search, and hotel rooms, telephone lines, and fax machines may be monitored.

Internet access in Burma is extremely limited, highly restricted, and very expensive. Access to most free

email services, such as Yahoo! mail, are prohibited. All emails are read by military personnel. It is illegal to own an unregistered modem in Burma. Some major hotels may offer internet service for a high price, and transmitting photographs via email may result in an exorbitant charge. One foreign visitor was presented with a bill for \$2,000 after transmitting one photograph via email at one of Burma's major hotels.

U.S. Treasury sanctions on Burma are in effect, banning the import of almost all Burmese products into the United States, even in personal luggage. This includes gifts, souvenirs, and items for personal use.

The Burmese authorities do not regularly report the arrest of U.S. citizens to the U.S. embassy. Torture has been reported from Burmese jails, and foreigners may be denied rights such as access to an attorney, access to court records, and family or consular visits. The military junta controls the criminal justice system, and usually orders maximum sentences, especially when the accused is suspected of involvement in political activity.

Electricity

Burma uses 230V/ 50Hz power, so travelers will need a power converter to use an American appliance in Burma. Types C, D, F, and G plugs are reportedly used in Burma; better hotels tend to have type G outlets. Many major hotel chains have installed multipurpose outlets, which will accept a variety of plug types. Travelers will most likely need a set of converter plugs to adapt American types A and B plugs to fit in Burmese outlets.