



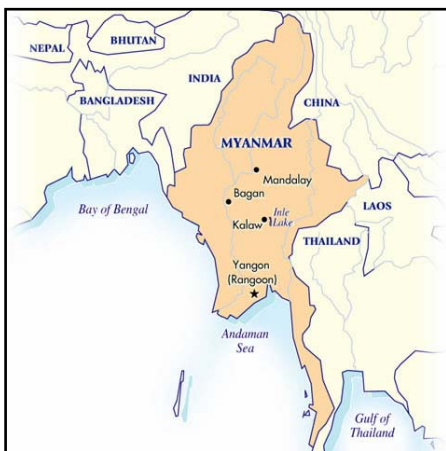
## 2008 UNA-GB

# Middle School MUN

## TOPIC GUIDE: THE SITUATION IN MYANMAR

### READ TO DISCOVER:

1. What are the political and living conditions for people in Myanmar?
2. What has limited Burmese citizens' access to international aid?
3. If human rights violations are being committed by a government within their own country, how can other countries respond?



### COUNTRY FACTS

- Largest country in Southeast Asia; slightly smaller than Texas
- Population: approximately 55 million people
- 89% of population is Buddhist
- 8 major ethnic groups and more than 5 practiced religions
- Formerly called Burma, name changed to Myanmar in 1989.<sup>1</sup>
- 70% of economy is based on agriculture
- Average citizen makes about \$300 per year (in the United States, the average person makes \$44,000 per year)
- Cyclones, earthquakes, and flooding are not uncommon due to Myanmar's tropical climate

### TERMS & CONCEPTS

**Military junta:** a government ruled by military leaders who usually obtain power by force

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Today, a **military junta** called the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) governs Myanmar. Myanmar has many natural resources and was once one of the richest countries in Southeast Asia. Myanmar has poor

<sup>1</sup> The United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia do not recognize the government's name change of 1989 from Burma to Myanmar. Because they believe the non-democratic government does not reflect the positions of its citizens, these states do not recognize the name change.



## TERMS & CONCEPTS

**Infrastructure:** Services that should be provided by the government to care for its people (e.g. roads, sewers, etc.)

**Colonize:** when a country settles a new area

**Democracy:** a form of government in which the people hold the supreme power under a free electoral system

**Communism:** a form of government based on common ownership of property and the means of production (machines, tools, roads)

**Coup d'état:** the sudden overthrow of a government by a part of the state establishment, usually the military

**infrastructure**, weak health and education systems, and widespread rural poverty. The economy is unstable and the currency, the Kyat, is weak. Although the country has three official branches of government – executive, legislative, and judicial – the ruling military junta controls all political and economic matters.

## HISTORY OF THE PROBLEM

### Colonial history

For hundreds of years, various local kings and queens ruled the area. This changed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the British began to **colonize** India and other territories to the East. In 1886, the British named Burma a province of India, making the country officially part of the British Empire. For more than fifty years, Burma remained a British colony. It was not until 1948 that the Burmese people became an independent nation.

### Political History

Having been under colonial rule for 62 years, the Burmese suddenly found themselves without a government when the British government left. There were many groups within the country that fought among themselves over what type of political system should be started. Some groups thought that Burma should establish a **democracy**. Others considered **communism** to be better for the country.

A democratic government was established in Burma in 1948. Having always lived under a king or queen, the Burmese people had little experience with the running of the government. Many of the people were very happy with the new system, but others still believed that communism or some other type of government would work better for them. It was hard for the democratic government to be very strong when so many people disagreed with it.

In 1962, the Burmese military carried out a **coup d'état**, overthrew the government and killed the President. After the coup d'état, General Ne Win became the leader of Burma and almost all important government positions were given to military leaders.



Junta leader Sen. Gen. Than Shwe  
© AP/ David Longstreath



A military junta still rules in Myanmar today. All of the most powerful people in the government are military officers. Many people in Myanmar and around the world are unhappy with the junta and want democracy to return to the country.

### Human Rights Violations

The Burmese junta was named “one of the world’s most repressive **regimes**” in a special report to the UN Commission on Human Rights in 2003.<sup>2</sup> The military government uses physical force and often violence to control its own citizens. Many Burmese who have mysteriously disappeared had been outspoken in their dislike for the government; the disappearances have been regarded as rather suspicious.

Reports have shown the Burmese do not receive many of their basic human rights such as clean water, stable health clinics, freedom of speech and freedom of the press. It is noted that thousands of people have been forced to leave their homes and move to other areas of the country. Forced labor is also a large problem in Myanmar including thousands of children who have been forced into the country’s army.<sup>3</sup>

### Universal Declaration of Human Rights

*The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a document, adopted by the UN in 1948, that defines the rights to which all human beings are entitled.*

### Religion in Myanmar

Myanmar is considered the most religious Buddhist country in the world. The culture is based on **Theravada Buddhism**, a very traditional branch of Buddhism. Buddhist monks, the most respected members of Burmese society, represent a population of almost half a million.<sup>4</sup> They completely dedicate their lives to religion, providing a spiritual and moral example for others. It is the monks, not the government or military rulers whom the people trust.

Buddhism influences all aspects of Burmese culture, especially politics. In Myanmar, authority comes from both spiritual and political leadership. The current government uses force and fear to control the Burmese people while monks have moral and spiritual influence without having to intimidate them with force.

### TERMS & CONCEPTS

Regime: a government

### TERMS & CONCEPTS

Theravada Buddhism: the oldest surviving Buddhist belief system. They believe in the importance of the advice of the wise and that all human suffering is a result of negative emotions such as greed, jealousy, and hatred.

<sup>2</sup> “The World’s Most Repressive Regimes 2003.” <http://www.middle-east-info.org/gateway/mostrepressiveregimes.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k5/wr2005.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/30/weekinreview/30mydans.html>



Since the Burmese population is almost entirely Buddhist, their spiritual leaders have a lot of influence over the citizens. The government understands this and usually seeks approval of the monks before taking action. They provide funding for monasteries as well as food for the monastic population. This has made it possible for a military-lead government to maintain power in a country where most people hold peaceful religious beliefs.

The most powerful monks in Burmese society gained their positions from connections with the elite (upper) class, many of whom are members of the ruling military government. The junta has been able to maintain such a good relationship with the monks because the top ranking monks were hand-selected by the military itself.



Aung San Suu Kyi,  
Burmese Human Rights  
activist ©BBC

In the past, the military has claimed to rule the country in the name of the monks. Until recently, it was unheard of for the military regime to break the bond between the political and religious leaders because the government knew that the people looked to their religious leaders, rather than political leaders, for guidance.

### *Protests Met with Violence*

One of the most internationally known human rights violations in Myanmar was the **8888 Uprising**. On August 8, 1988, thousands of people rose up against Myanmar’s government because they wanted to bring democracy to Myanmar. At first, most of the protesters were students but soon many others joined in the protest, including thousands of Buddhist monks. The government used force to end the uprising. By the time the uprising ended a month later, thousands of people had been killed.

After the 8888 Uprising, Myanmar returned to its former order with an increased military presence in an attempt to maintain control. Many international organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, tried to restore human rights in Myanmar. However, the government did not want outside groups interfering and tried to hide the conditions Burmese people lived in.

In recent years there has been growing unease in the population because of the economic distress of the country. Myanmar is ranked among the 20 poorest countries in the world by the United Nations Development Programme.<sup>5</sup>

In the fall of 2007, many people in Myanmar were unhappy with the government. Until then the government had been providing fuel **subsidies**, but unannounced, the junta withdrew the assistance causing the price of gasoline to skyrocket. With new, much higher fuel prices, came drastically increased food prices.

### TERMS & CONCEPTS

**8888 Uprising:** a national revolution in Myanmar when citizens demanded democracy. It took place on August 8, 1988.

**Subsidies:** financial assistance by a government to a business deemed worthwhile to the public

<sup>5</sup> [http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country\\_fact\\_sheets/cty\\_fs\\_MMR.html](http://hdrstats.undp.org/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_MMR.html)



### Sound familiar?

Did you notice how gasoline prices have risen rapidly in 2008 and how frustrated many people are? To make things worse, food prices have risen sharply, too. For example, the cost of eggs rose over 30%. That means that if last year you paid about \$1.50 for a dozen, by early summer 2008 that same product cost \$2.00!

With rapidly worsening economic conditions, protestors took to the streets. Many of these people wanted to establish a democratic government that would not ignore the peoples' needs. Starting with a small number of upset young people, the demonstrations grew quickly adding many different segments of the population. Eventually, even hundreds of Myanmar's beloved monks were involved in protesting the government.

The junta responded harshly to the protests. However, because they tightly control the flow of information in and out of Myanmar, it is hard to know just what happened. Reports estimate the number of deaths to be as low as 13 or as high as 800, but there is no real way to know the actual number. It is also reported that several hundred monks and other protesters were arrested, and some may have been badly tortured. Regardless of the fact that the exact numbers have never been confirmed, many groups and individuals point to the protests of 2007 as an example of the violent human rights abuses that occur frequently in Myanmar.

### CYCLONE NARGIS



This image, from the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service, shows the areas (shaded) in Myanmar where most rice production used to take place.

### KEY POINTS

- May 2, 2008 the cyclone touched land in Myanmar's main agricultural region, the Irrawaddy Delta, with winds up to 135 mph
- An estimated 135,000 citizens are dead or missing and approximately one million people are homeless
- International aid was not allowed into the country until three weeks after the cyclone devastated the region
- Proper sanitation and drinking water are no longer accessible in Yangon.

### Distribution of Aid

In the wake of Cyclone Nargis, the people of Yangon, Myanmar were left without access to clean drinking water or proper sewage systems. Though the government did not have enough money to supply much-needed resources, they did not want to appear weak and unable to provide for their own citizens. Unfortunately, this meant that very few people received aid immediately after the cyclone because the



**TERMS & CONCEPTS**

**Propaganda:** information or advertisements that promote an opinion or idea

**Sanitation:** facilities for safe disposal of human waste.

government did not have the ability to reach all those in need. Eventually, aid supplied by international organizations was allowed into the country by the junta. Several reports accuse the government of turning aid distribution into a **propaganda** stunt by the junta.<sup>6</sup>

The larger problem of clean water still remains; for years, government neglect of basic systems of **sanitation** and water purification caused many people to suffer from preventable illnesses. Before the cyclone hit, almost 50 out of every 1,000 children died from unsafe drinking water every year. During the cyclone, 75% of health care organizations in the delta were destroyed.<sup>7</sup> Several months after Cyclone Nargis, over 63% of residents of the Irrawaddy Delta still do not have access to clean drinking water or health care facilities.



Local people help rebuild infrastructure after Nargis. © BBC

**PAST INTERNATIONAL ACTIONS**

Political and human rights issues in Myanmar have caused many international outcries but little active involvement by the United Nations. After the 8888 Uprising, people around the world called for UN action to stop the junta from violently controlling its people. The Security Council, however, passed no resolutions.

Even without UN action in 1988, Myanmar has continued to receive attention. When human rights violations continued to occur, countries like the United States, France, and the United Kingdom became very concerned for the Burmese people. In September of 2006, the United States requested the situation in Myanmar be put on the agenda for the next Security Council meeting, a largely symbolic gesture that drew attention to the situation. No resolutions were written or passed on the issue.

**TERMS & CONCEPTS**

**Domestic:** within the home or country

By January 2007, a draft resolution, with a good deal of international support, was debated in the Security Council. It called for the junta to restore the people's human rights. Included in the draft resolution were clauses asking for the government to stop using force against the people and to allow international humanitarian organizations into Myanmar. However, some countries used their veto power to make sure that the draft resolution did not pass. They believed the situation in Myanmar was a **domestic** issue. Unless the situation threatened international peace and security, they did not believe the Security Council should get involved.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/05/10/news/Myanmar-Cyclone.php>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.refugeesinternational.org/content/article/detail/10831>



The events of September of 2007 brought Myanmar back into the international spotlight. The Security Council recognized that the recurring human rights violations were creating an escalating problem in Myanmar. Although no resolution was passed, the Security Council did issue a statement condemning the violence used against the peaceful protesters. The statement also called for the release of all political prisoners in Myanmar. This time, even the countries that previously objected to Security Council involvement agreed that there was a problem in Myanmar that needed to be addressed by the international community.

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How is the crisis important to the international community and your country in particular?
2. Why is it important that human rights be respected in all countries?
3. What is your country's human rights record?
4. How does your country feel about national sovereignty when considering human rights issues?
5. How does your country approach international aid or peacekeeping missions?
6. How do the consequences of a non-democratic government come into effect? Is your country a democracy?

## POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

### *Sovereignty*

The UN must be careful not to interfere with the political independence of other countries because countries have the right and responsibility to govern themselves. When the UN does get involved, they first seek solutions through peaceful means like negotiation. Although a peaceful solution is what the Security Council would always like, in some situations these diplomatic approaches are unsuccessful. Most often, the Security Council reacts to situations in the following ways.

- Seeks support for the efforts of all United Nations agencies and humanitarian organizations
- Encourages increased political talks and meetings among nations
- Promote discussions to include all those involved in politics within the country
- Imposes sanctions
- Increases humanitarian aid
- Breaks diplomatic relations



## **BLOC POSITIONS**

### ***China***

Much of early Burmese history is deeply rooted in Chinese history, many populations that are within Myanmar today were migrants who came by way of the Chinese border. The Chinese government has, in the past, supplied the Burmese government with military aid as a method of maintaining their close relationship. Also, Chinese companies that are located within Myanmar are interested in maintaining allegiances between the two countries.

### ***Russian Federation and Eastern Europe***

The Russian Federation, like China, does not wish to get involved with the political affairs of Myanmar. There has been evidence to show that many of the weapons the Burmese military use come from Russia. The black market for weaponry has created an economic alliance between these two countries. The Russian economy depends heavily on the income from their global weapons trades. Many countries in Eastern Europe have similar positions to that of the Russian Federation but have far less political sway.

### ***France, the United Kingdom, and the United States***

These countries have voiced strong opposition to the human rights violations of the Burmese government. The only difference between the opinions of these nations, however, is that the United States has asked for harsher sanctions against the government in order to stop human rights violations. Since Myanmar was a former colony of the United Kingdom, there is some strain between these two countries. The United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union have put a tremendous amount of pressure on the Burmese government to end poppy growth that leads to drug trade on the international black market.

### ***Asia***

Many countries within the Asian continent rely on illicit drug trafficking as a source of national revenue. For this reason, they are very hesitant to impose sanctions on the Burmese government. In addition to the drug trade, sanctions for human rights violations would also force the international community to look at the violations that happen within other Asian nations. There is concern that there would be a ripple effect, and many Asian nations do not want to be forced to change their systems of government. The Southeast Asian nations that are current members of the Security Council take a strong stand of non-interference in the affairs of the Burmese government. Their attitudes toward interference find root in the economic organization known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

### ***Africa***

African nations have little say in the affairs of Myanmar. They are forced to align themselves with more powerful nations because, similarly to Asian countries, they do not want to imply their own governments in human rights violations and corruption charges.



### ***Latin America***

The Latin American bloc does not have a very strong connection to the situation in Myanmar. However, some governments in Latin America used to be run by military juntas. Latin American governments are able to understand the problems that occur in Myanmar, but are mostly powerless to have any affect on changing them. Also, the problems within their own region are so extensive that they do not want to get involved in more global situations that do not affect them.

## **RESEARCH SITES**

### **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights** - <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>

The official document that defined Human Rights as generally agreed upon by (most) UN member states.

### **Commodity Intelligence Report** -

[http://www.pecad.fas.usda.gov/highlights/2008/06/Burma\\_rice\\_jun08/](http://www.pecad.fas.usda.gov/highlights/2008/06/Burma_rice_jun08/)

An analysis of the damage to Myanmar's rice paddies by the US Department of Agriculture Foreign Agricultural Service.

### **PBS reporting on the cyclone** -

[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth\\_coverage/asia/cyclone08/slideshow/index.html?type=flash](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/indepth_coverage/asia/cyclone08/slideshow/index.html?type=flash)

Images and description of the effects of the cyclone.

### **BBC undercover report on Myanmar** -

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaselector/check/player/nol/newsid\\_7020000/newsid\\_7021100?redirect=7021151.stm&news=1&nbwm=1&bbram=1&bbwm=1&nbram=1&asb=1](http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaselector/check/player/nol/newsid_7020000/newsid_7021100?redirect=7021151.stm&news=1&nbwm=1&bbram=1&bbwm=1&nbram=1&asb=1)

An unnamed reporter managed to record images of Myanmar during the protest in September, 2007.

### **Stop Disasters Game** - <http://www.stopdisastersgame.org/en/>

A game produced by the UN as part of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction. Build a community and try to make it safe from natural disasters!

### **Human Rights around the World** -

<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/Pages/HumanRightsintheWorld.aspx>

Information about the human rights records for every country.