

# MYANMAR – COVID CHALLENGES – CHURCH RESPONSE

REPORT FROM THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE 2<sup>ND</sup> OF OCTOBER 2020

## Introduction

This brief report on COVID is prepared as the country is shocked by the viral resurgence. It threatens the food security of thousands and crashes an already wobbly economy. Initially, the COVID virus was merciful to Myanmar. From March till mid-August, the number of infections was just under 400 and deaths under 10. A mid-August outbreak in the western state of Rakhine has since been followed by a surge in the commercial capital of Yangon and nationwide, an infectious trend that has shown no signs of slowing.

Despite its best efforts of the government efforts, the spread is overwhelming to the frontline health professionals. That's having political and economic impacts that could sow instability and paralysis in the weeks ahead, particularly in the context of general elections due on November 8. Stay home and Lockdown brings huge social stress in a country of 70 per cent of the working force in the informal sector. Myanmar already has been facing chronic pre-COVID social and health comorbidities.

Positive case rate soars as virus takes hold in Yangon

Myanmar's high positive case rate – positive tests relative to total tests – underscores the need to expand testing and maintain restrictions in COVID-19 hotspots like Yangon



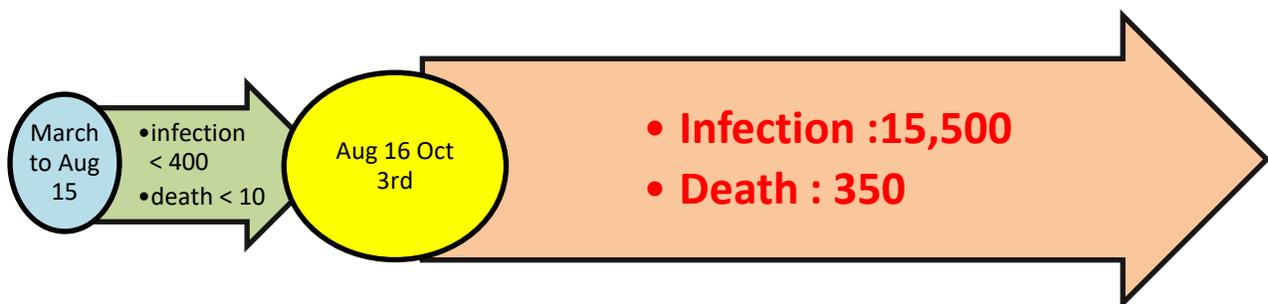
Chart: Frontier Myanmar - Source: Ministry of Health and Sports - Created with Datawrapper

Catholic church accompanies the people of Myanmar in this great challenge to their dignity and survival. This paper summarises the efforts of the Catholic Church so far and articulates its plan to save lives and help the government and civil society to stabilize the challenges.

## The Exponential spread of the Second Phase

First Phase (Mar -Aug - Six Months)

Second Phase (Aug-Oct 3/ 50 days!)



## Myanmar – Pre COVID Social and Health comorbidities.

### Context :

- Myanmar is a Low and Middle-Income Country. (LMIC). COVID arrives in a country that is already facing many chronic Socio-economic and political challenges.

- The 2017 Living Conditions Survey reported 24.8 per cent of Myanmar's population as poor and a further 32.9 per cent vulnerable to falling into poverty due to unanticipated shocks.

### Most vulnerable population :



- COVID emerged as a great challenge to the people of Myanmar, especially those who are vulnerable. The thousands of migrant workers, thrown out from various countries, entered the country already reeling under huge livelihood challenges.
- The presence of IDP camps in the Kachin and other areas pose the challenge of community spread. The increased conflict in Rakhine areas and the displacement of new communities who lack access service delivery
- The slum populations in nearly 26 settlements in Yangon and Mandalay. Most of them are daily wage workers. Social distancing is an impossibility.

### Health concerns

- There are 6.7 doctors and 10 registered nurses per 10,000 population.
- 24 per cent of the population has an existing Pre COVID health condition : (cardiovascular, neurological, or respiratory)
- Myanmar is susceptible to 3D – malaria, TB and HIV aids.
- Low and middle-income countries (LMIC) capacity for upscaling the testing ( as at the beginning of 150 per million.)
- The rainy season further hampered social distancing.
- Monsoon's arrival in June usually brings other major public health challenges such as dengue, influenza, and malaria – factors that have further strained the health and disaster response systems.



### Livelihood security.



- A contemporary labour survey by the World Bank reported that 83 per cent of the country's 24 million workforces were in the informal sector, meaning most lacked social protection. Even in the formal sector, only 37 per cent (about 1.45 million) are covered by the government's Social Security Board.
- The 2017 Living Conditions Survey reported 24.8 per cent of Myanmar's population as poor and a further 32.9 per cent vulnerable to falling into poverty due to unanticipated shocks. Myanmar is a Low and Middle-Income Country. (LMIC). COVID arrives in a country that is already facing many chronic economic and political challenges.

### Most vulnerable population :

- ***Migrant Workers:*** COVID will be a great challenge to the people of Myanmar, especially those who are vulnerable. The thousands of migrant workers, thrown out from various countries, entered the country in thousands. An estimated 3 million are migrant workers
- ***IDP Camps:*** The presence of IDP camps in the Kachin and other areas and challenge of herd spread. The increasing conflict in Rakhine areas and the displacement of new communities and lack of access to these communities
- ***Urban Slums:*** The slum populations in nearly 26 settlements. The bigger areas are Hlaingtharyar (estimated population of 700,000 and density of 15,000 per square Km)

## CHURCH RESPONSE - TWO PHASES

### 1. Phase One: March 2020 to August 2020

#### 1.1 Organizational Arrangements



- As soon as WHO described COVID-19 as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Myanmar (CBCM) held its first meeting on COVID-19 response on 16th March 2020.
- Then, the Diocesan Bishop produced pastoral guidelines on COVID-19 for each diocese
  - On 30th March 2020, CBCM structured the "Catholic National COVID-19 Response Coordination Team" (CNCCT) by the guidance of Cardinal Charles Bo.

- The team composed of Patron Bishops, CBCM Secretariat Team, Episcopal Commission on Health Pastoral Care (ECHPC), Karuna Mission Social Solidarity – KMSS (Caritas Myanmar), Catholic Religious Conference of Myanmar (CRCM), Office for Social Communication (OSC) and other technical advisors.
- Subsequently, similar to the Diocesan COVID-19 response team was set up in each diocese. Myanmar Catholic Church Response to COVID-19

#### 1.2 Prioritized Approaches

- Priority 1: *Excluded/ Vulnerable Group – Disabled, Leprosy, Home for the Aged, Orphanage, People living with HIV and Home-base care.*
- Priority 2: *Frontline workers of the Church - Parish Priest, Caretakers*
- Priority 3: *Community and Government Health Department*



#### 1.3 Program Response

1. COVID-19 Awareness
  - Public Awareness through Office of Social Communication (OSC) and Radio Veritas Asia (RVA)
  - Poster and pamphlets
2. Duty of Care and Preventive Measures/ items
  - Developed and shared Duty of Care for Church's Frontline Workers
  - Provision of preventive measures/ items to Church's Frontline Workers and vulnerable groups
3. COVID-19 Prevention
  - Water and Sanitation (WASH) especially Hand Washing Improvement and provision of handwashing soap to communities
4. Quarantine Facilities: Offer of Major Seminary as the Quarantine Center

#### 1.4 Key Achievements First Phase – KMSS Caritas Reports

- 39,539 peoples received COVID-19 messaging on prevention and access to services
- 36,204 peoples obtained critical WASH supplies (including hygiene items) and services
- 7,676 peoples received subsistence support (basis needs support) for emergency
- 5,000 Scrub suits, 10,000 pcs of masks and gloves donated to Yangon Regional Public Health Department of Minister of Health and Sports (MOHS) on 8th May 2020.
- CRCM and the religious congregations actively involved in sewing scrub suits for the donation. Read more <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/sewing-compassion.html>
- 974 Church Frontline Responders (Parish priests, Catechist, Caretakers) and 934 Healthcare Workers (Doctors, Nurses and other health workers) received preventive items
- 291 Handwashing stations installed in maintenance with UNICEF specifications
- 60 Scrub suites supported to Catholic Youth volunteering in the hospitals.
- Support to Hospital in South Okkalapa Township

#### 1.5 Food supply by Various Religious Congregations/ Dioceses

- ❖ Several Congregations and Dioceses were involved in food delivery to more than 4000 families.
- ❖ Many Catholic lay groups were involved in the supply of food and support to the government initiatives for food supply.
- ❖ Catholic Religious Conference of Myanmar (CRCM) was involved in the preparation of PPE (personal protective equipment)
- ❖ Myanmar people have a tradition of sharing even when they are poor, their resources with suffering people. It was in full display during the first phase, greatly easing the hunger distress, reaching out to the most vulnerable areas.



#### 1.6 Response in the IDP Camps

- ❖ KMSS reached out to the crowded Kachin Camps and the recently displaced Rakhine camps. PPE distribution and preventive measures sensitization was done in the camps. Mercifully the camps are spared of the expected spread.
- ❖ Food security in the camps was ensured by the World Food Program who is the partner to the KMSS.

#### 1.7 Advocacy: Appeal for Cease-Fire and Peacemaking

- ❖ The CBCM (Catholic Bishops Conference of Myanmar) and Cardinal Charles Maung Bo made a passionate appeal for the ceasefire by all parties. An appeal for an integrated response of all stakeholders was also made.
- ❖ Religions for Peace (RfP) issued an appeal to the state and non-state actors to resist fighting during the COVID response. Thankfully fighting has stopped in some areas.

## **SECOND PHASE CHURCH PLAN FOR THE EXPONENTIAL SURGE**

### **Catholic National Covid-19 Response Coordinating Team (CNCCT)**

When the second wave struck in the second week of August, there was an emergency meeting held with the following persons through zoom meeting on 24<sup>th</sup> September 2020.

#### Church

- His Eminence Cardinal Charles Maung Bo
- Bishop John Saw Yaw Han – Auxiliary Yangon Diocese
- Bishop Raymon Sunlut – Bishop Patron – KMSS -Caritas Network
- Bishop Alexander - Bishop of Pyay wherein the Rakhine state is covered

#### KMSS Caritas

- Dr Win Tun Kyi, National Director, KMSS Myanmar
- Fr Dominic, Director, Yangon KMSS
- Mr Joseph K – Consultant, KMSS
- Fr C Amalraj SJ - Animation

#### *A brief Situation Report of the Second Wave*

- 15,000 + cases (as of 2/10/20) + a new virulent variety of virus enters Myanmar
- > 700 cases / day
- 350 + deaths
- Positive rate 10+%
- Hotspots – Yangon & Rakhine

#### *Urgent Concerns*

- Employment rate drops from 75% to 46%
- 60% in agriculture wage labour in rural areas out of the job
- 50% in construction/tourism out of the job
- 75% of rice farmers not planted yet
- 7.3% HH reduced food consumption
- Food security is an emerging a great concern since the country has nearly 70 per cent labour in the informal sector
- The supply chain and market access is disturbed impacting livelihoods
- The continued flare of the virus could end up in total closure and rationing of food.
- Neighbouring countries have shown great reluctance to get back the returned Myanmar migrant workers, jeopardizing livelihood options for thousands of families.

## Church Plan

### **A. Immediate Response**

1. **Focus on the hotspots** of Yangon and Rakhine and be ready for other areas.
2. **Ensure food security** to starting with 1000 families in and around Yangon city - Ward Leaders to support dry rations to vulnerable families
3. **Preventive approach:** Sensitization and PPE distribution
4. **Provide Church facilities for quarantine facilities** – work with local health departments/ Not only the Major Seminaries, *even the Churches if they are needed.*

### **B. Intermediate Responses: Early warning and readiness to reach the most vulnerable**

1. Parish level intervention across all Dioceses Fundraising
2. All the diocese will go into sharing mode: 50 families supported per Parish
3. Local donations and management at Parish level
4. Standard guidance drafted and provided by CBCM and respective Bishops

### **C. The offer of More Church Spaces for Quarantine – Collaboration with government**

( Response to overflowing quarantine centres and the need for civil society to support the government efforts)

- a. Church will offer again the Major Seminary and also support the inmates with the daily allowance etc.
- b. The Thanlyin Seminary also has been offered and the authorities will use it when needed.
- c. In case of the need increases, the Catholic Church will offer Churches too.

#### **D. Advocacy for Integrated response and cease Fire**

1. National appeal by Cardinal for supporting Church initiative
2. Approach local business and well-wishers – through CBCM or respective Bishops
3. Explore online contribution mechanism into the bank account
4. Continued appeal for the government and other stakeholders to offer a co-ordinated strategy
5. Appeal to a total ceasefire to state and non-state actors in Myanmar

### **E. Resource Mobilization – Six months to One year**

1. Local-level fundraising – Christian families and friends, Christian business Assn
2. Embassies
3. Online Fund mobilization efforts – Special Banking arrangements.
4. National level Contingency Fund – from Dioceses, Business
5. Caritas Internationalis - Global Fund



## Psycho-Spiritual Interventions

### Rationale

Online Counselling Platform: COVID remains a disturbing experience – for those infected, the family and the community. Though formal counselling support has not been established and the



social distancing prevents direct interaction in Quarantine etc, social media and handphones offer an opportunity to reach out to those who are seized of anxiety and fear. Establishing an online counselling platform was recommended during the meeting. There are professionals and religious who are equipped with counselling skills. These can be roped in to form a core group of counsellors who can train volunteers in various languages to be available 'hotline' to interact with people.

Online Pastoral Presence: Since the Myanmar community – of all religions – is a faithbased community and the access to places of worship is constrained during the pandemic, Church will support pastoral presence, facilitating virtual participation of faith communities. This can be done through proper training of seminary candidates and religious who are at present allowed into the regular training.

This process will start with Christian communities and afterwards, it could extend to inter-religious approaches.

#### 1. Setting up an Online Counselling Platform

- a. Identifying the counselling professionals in the country
- b. Training Volunteers in Counselling
- c. Setting up a 'hotline' reaching out to panicked and anxious people

#### 2. Strengthening the formation and online pastoral presence

- a. Seminary Formation moves to online
- b. Online resources on spiritual and psychological support to be formed
- c. Spiritual support through national prayer link and local online initiatives.

### Update :

- CNCCT team headed by Bishop John Saw Yawhan met the government authorities and they have offered all assistance in the delivery of food despite the lockdown.
- Government is very happy about the church offering of quarantine facilities and will use them as the numbers increase.



2<sup>nd</sup> October 2020 - Yangon.