Bomb crater from an attack which destroyed a school in Karen State (Photo: Free Burma Rangers)
The title of this newsletter - “Education Under Fire” - is both figurative and, unfortunately, literal.

While the world reels in shock at the war in Ukraine, the killing and abuse of people in Myanmar continues with little media coverage in the West.

It has become a matter of course for our contact with beneficiaries or partners to be affected by airstrikes, power outages; news that someone is in danger, or that their friends or family have been killed, arrested or abused by security forces.

Throughout all of this, we are constantly inspired by the courage, resilience and determination of our friends in Burma, with their will to replace the old with something new and better.

Many of our students are still returning to their homes in the country after studying abroad, to give immediate support to their communities. Others are working from across borders to build international links and networks of young people who can create an alternative society if, or when, the national conflict ends.

Sadly, the potential of the upcoming generation of young people could be lost due to the collapse of the education system, along with the health system, economy and even food supplies. For many, their only option is to survive from day to day. They are vulnerable to human traffickers and forced conscription. They have nowhere to turn, and no hope.

But we all can help. Prospect Burma is working with local education partners to address the challenges young people face when wishing to continue their educational journey.

Thousands of young people are displaced and unable to study or work inside the country, and many make the dangerous journey to border areas. Through creating online learning, we have widened our programmes across more states and regions, and we have commenced face-to-face provision in the relative safety of cross-border settings.

With our partners, we help young people gain confidence, self-belief, information, guidance and critical thinking skills that will improve their future options.

We will be launching an appeal soon to support our work in the face of the increasing crisis.

I hope you will join us in doing what we can to avoid the young people of Myanmar becoming a generation lost to oppression and conflict.

Best wishes,
The Tragedy Continues...

One year after the military State Administration Council seized power, Myanmar remains in deep crisis. Repression, conflict and division have spread to all parts of the country in the fourth cycle of state breakdown and civil war since the country’s independence: in 1948 at the British departure, and in civil wars that reignited following military coups in 1962 and 1988. In 2022, the future is highly uncertain and, for the moment, there appears no end in sight for the sufferings of the people at any time soon.

The political landscape is one of violence and fragmentation. There are, in effect, two rivals claiming government authority: the military SAC and the National Unity Government, which brings together MPs-elect with civil society and ethnic leaders.

There is also a diversity of ethnic armed organisations, some of which are allied with the NUG and others independent, and across the country there are a host of militia backed by the SAC as well as new Peoples Defence Forces, many of which support the NUG.

Against this backdrop, the United Nations and other international bodies remain uncertain who to recognise as the government, and the SAC’s control is tenuous outside of the towns in many areas.

Meanwhile, the human cost continues to rise. Aung San Suu Kyi and other leaders of the National League for Democracy which won the 2020 general election remain in detention, facing long jail terms.

Over 1,800 civilians have been killed and 10,000 arrested by the security forces since the SAC takeover. A further 560,000 people have been internally displaced in the conflict zones including Chin, Kachin, Kayah and Karen States and Sagaing Region, bringing the number of refugees and IDPs to over two million. At the same time, the economy is in free fall, 40 per cent of the population is living in poverty, and over one million people have lost their jobs.

For the moment, Snr-Gen. Min Aung Hlaing and the SAC generals appear determined to press ahead in their own way. Political transition of the past decade is effectively dead, the ethnic peace process has broken down, and the SAC appears intent on dismantling the NLD. A new election is promised by the SAC within two years. But, on current trends, this seems only likely when the military leadership believe that they can control the outcome. Opposition remains undiminished.

In a troubled world, the international community is watching on in alarm. Western countries have ramped up sanctions, China keeps doors open to all sides, and Russia is the SAC’s closest ally. At the same time, new pressures are building up for the International Criminal Court and International Court of Justice to take actions against human rights violations.

But, for the moment, it is not the time for despair among young people. The desire for change is undaunted, education is the bedrock of hopes and reform aspirations, and, though the present hour is dark, the belief remains firm that better times are ahead. Support to keep the flame of education alive is ever more vital.
Education in Myanmar has been decimated by the country’s troubles. The coup, conflict and covid have destroyed a system already weakened by decades of neglect and abuse.

COVID-19

The state education system essentially closed entirely for 18 months between March 2020 and November 2021 due to covid. No remote or socially distanced alternatives were possible. An entire generation is now without education, qualifications, or hope of a career.

6,000 of Myanmar’s 47,000 basic education schools were repurposed as quarantine centres. Extensive plans were drawn up to restart education but it was clear that many schools could not meet reopening requirements for classroom sizes or sanitation: Nearly a third of schools in conflict-affected areas do not even have access to water.

Boycotts

A nationwide teachers’ strike has been ongoing since February 2021, in protest at the coup. Within three months, the SAC had suspended the contracts of 130,000 teachers - nearly a third of the workforce - and evicted thousands from their homes. There are numerous reports of teachers arrested or killed by security forces, and of their families being targeted.

Similarly, there is a national student boycott of state education. Social media regularly shows young people railing against “slave education”. Many young people have protested publicly, so now cannot attend school due to the risk of arrest. The Myanmar Teachers Federation says 90% of students refused to enrol for the 2021-22 academic year.

Enrolment takes place in late May for the start of the new academic year in June, against a complex social debate. Aside from generational tensions and questions of basic need, families must choose between risking arrest if their children do not attend, or becoming social outcasts if they do - a horrible situation either way.

Attacks on schools

The military and its opponents are fighting to control education as a tool of influence and government. Schools are therefore a target for all sides.

The military alleges that more than 500 schools have been destroyed by protesters. There are numerous press reports and social media posts showing schools being burned.

There is also clear evidence of schools being destroyed by military airstrikes, ground attacks and burning. Prospect Burma has first-hand experience of a partner education provider having to relocate to a neighbouring state due to airstrikes.

This can have other knock-on effects: When a high school in Thantlang was destroyed by the military, this also put a school in nearby Thlan Rawn out of action as it became a home for the displaced. Save The Children estimate 150,000 children are displaced in the current conflict.

Historical context

Attacks on schools have increased since the coup, but this is not a new phenomenon. In 2017, UNICEF called on the military and ethnic organisations to protect schools following a series of attacks that year.

Low attendance is also not a new problem. The official high
school drop-out rate in 2020 was 30%. At Prospect Burma, we are consistently told by young people in remote areas that the majority of children drop out even earlier. They face barriers including cost, language and availability of school places beyond Grade 4. They also face competing pressures; their help is often needed in the fields or to take care of the home or siblings.

Impact on examination results

In 2021, no students took their matriculation exams due to the COVID-19 school closures. These exams are a broad equivalent of high school exit exams, and are the principle accredited route for most young people in Myanmar to access higher education or a professional career inside the country.

Although schools are now open, safety issues and widespread boycotts are continuing to impact exam numbers. In 2022, the number of students signing up for matriculation exams decreased by over two thirds, compared to 2020 figures (the last figures before the pandemic and the coup).

The situation wasn’t much better in the 2010s. Less than 300,000 students passed their matriculations each year. The 2014 census showed half of 25-29 year olds (now in their thirties) had no schooling at all, or only had primary schooling. Prospect Burma receives many applications for support from this age group as well as younger adults.

Quality of education

The pedagogy in Myanmar schools focuses on repetition and memorisation.

Lessons are taught in Burmese, regardless of the local language. A young person can get a good mark if they can remember the exact wording of their textbook, without even being able to understand the book or speak the language it is written in.

One of the iconic sounds of Myanmar is of a classroom of children being taught to remember sentences through chanting. Students are not taught to question, analyse, negotiate or problem-solve.

Accreditation

For a wide variety of reasons, many young people do not have documented evidence of their educational background to apply to international universities.

Non-formal education is not recognised at all. Meanwhile Burmese high schools only teach to Grade 10, but most international universities require proof of 12 years’ education.

The closure of schools and universities in Myanmar has prevented students from accessing their current transcripts. Many students had begun a university course but are now left in limbo and do not know where to turn.

Regional aspect

The national outlook may be poor, but national figures mask regional disparities which are even worse.

There is a correlation between poor educational outcomes and levels of poverty. In 2018, the Ministry of Education recorded that Chin State had the highest poverty rate (73%) and lowest matriculation exam pass rate (17%), while Mandalay had the opposite – the equal lowest poverty rate.
(13%) and highest exam pass rate (38%).

The situation has worsened since those figures were published, with media reporting that most schools in Chin State, and Sagaing and Magway Regions, are unable to function properly due to armed conflict.

The way forward

The SAC and the NUG (National Unity Government) are formulating competing plans to fill some of the gap left by the shelving of the second National Education Strategic Plan, which was due in 2021.

Various suggestions for some form of Federal University have been posited by opposition groups, outside of SAC influence.

Online education portals, such as Spring University Myanmar, have appeared. Land has even been earmarked for a physical university in Mon State.

For the moment though, Community Based Organisations (CBOs) and international NGOs are filling the gap where they can. Prospect Burma has longstanding experience in this field and its work is expanding in the current crisis.

We are working closely with our partners to ensure the guidance and education opportunities we can provide are targeted, coordinated and effective.

We can only help a small proportion of those in need. But every young person we help to educate can have a profound influence on hundreds or thousands of others.
The numbers were boosted by workers who were out of a job since the coup, and students finding their education truncated by the closure of Myanmar universities.

The underlying tone of many applications was fiercer than previous years. Comments included:

“I can’t study under the boots of the military while my colleagues are murdered or arrested”; and: “Only university people know what is right and wrong because of the education they have. So, this military coup, they wanted to eliminate all the educated people in the country. They have burned our schools, they have killed the students, they have hunted down the teachers”.

The impact of the economic collapse is prevalent. One applicant in Yangon says: “My mom recently lost her stock because the whole market burned down”. Another in Hpa-An says: “Since the coup and covid, we stay at home and try to sell groceries. My father can’t afford to go to the petrol station. I try my best to support my family and my country, but my country does not support us”.

For many, COVID-19 has driven a desire to study medicine or public health. One aspiring doctor writes: “The pandemic separated families and left many in tears. If we were able to carry out protocols and have more front-line employees such as more doctors, I do believe that these would be reduced. Money is not my main goal and so I do believe in being there for the sick and the needy”.

The pandemic has also fired the creativity of young people to find solutions in other fields of study. One Computing applicant writes: “Most lower class people use only cash. We noticed cash payment is one of the reasons to spread the virus and many diseases. I plan to start a FinTech business which must be easy to use, even from a village”.

Most applicants are interested in improving their communities’ living conditions, and it is clear that the last year’s urgent issues are, in many ways, just added to a pile of problems they were already facing.

There are longstanding land ownership issues. One applicant writes: “In 2007, the military government took my parents’ farm without paying anything for it. My family sent me to a [refugee] camp and I never saw them again”.

This is common. There is a pervading feeling of lawlessness, stretching back far before the last year. Another writes: “I come from a small town where drugs, gangs and crime have always been found on every corner”.

But people from Myanmar have amazing resilience. Where there is suffering, they look to create solutions. One Food Sciences applicant writes: “The local people have to pay the military and the ethnic armed group. Our land grows a lot of opium because of the profits. But our high plateaus, hot days and cool nights are perfect for coffee cultivation which could be used for social change and a new income”.

The number of farming related applications reminds us that three quarters of Myanmar’s workforce works the land. They are frequently impacted by natural disasters including typhoons, flooding and earthquakes. But, again, young people want to make a difference.

A Civil Engineering applicant writes: “Seeing the damage to businesses and homes from earthquakes, I read everything I could about why different structures were damaged and how they are being rebuilt without structural engineers. I want to build better houses with my knowledge and experience”.

Life will get worse in Myanmar. Regardless if someone or no one wins the nation’s power struggle, the country will suffer typhoons, food insecurity, poor healthcare, poverty and human rights abuses in the coming years.

The country’s best long term hope is its next generation. The applications we receive from them prove they are well placed to identify the issues; also that they have the resilience to create the foundations of a better place to live, even as basic services collapse around them.
Dr Thein Lwin

Dr Thein Lwin graduated in 1997. He has become a leading proponent of better quality teaching in Myanmar.

Dr Thein Lwin has founded various teaching centres, principally the Thinking Classroom Foundation. This has trained 400-500 teachers annually to use critical thinking pedagogy, rather than rote memorisation. Now based in Chiang Mai, Thailand, it continues to train teachers both side of the border.

Dr Thein Lwin has been a longstanding campaigner to embed critical thinking in the Myanmar curriculum. His work for the National Network for Education Reform and other campaign and advisory groups helped to put the issue on the Myanmar government agenda before the 2021 coup.

Dr Thein Lwin says: “Thinking Classroom Foundation empowers teachers to practice active learning and critical thinking; and promotes self-determination in education at all regions in Myanmar as well as that students have the right to direct their own lives.”

Kyaw Kyaw Min Htut

Kyaw Kyaw Min Htut graduated in Social Science for Sustainable Development from Chiang Mai University in 2012.

He is the co-founder of BEAM (Bridging Educational Access to Marginalized People). BEAM works with migrant students across the Thai border as well as rural populations in nine states/divisions in Burma.

BEAM offers a pathway to higher education, vocational training, language courses, legal assistance and policy advocacy, an internship programme, educational innovation and scholarships for university students in need. BEAM is currently working on teaching courses via local computer networks, in remote areas with no internet or phone signal.

Kyaw Kyaw Min Htut says: “Education is the cultural process to make youth to be resilient against the challenges and abuses. Resilient youth are the walls to prevent communities from dictatorship and the pillars to rebuild the democratic society in Burma.”

Yi Kay (name changed)

Yi Kay graduated from a Masters course in Educational Administration in Thailand in 2019. Within a year of returning to Kachin State, she founded and, with her family’s help, physically built a new English Language Centre.

She says: “After I graduated from abroad, I am more confident in my work field. I’ve established my own English Language Centre in Myitkyina. I offer English courses for all ages”.

Yi Kay pays back the faith put in her by Prospect Burma donors many times over by, not only teaching English, but training other English teachers to engage students to lead on English lessons using issues which are relevant to students including identity and respect. She also helps teachers to run schools or their own private practices.

She says: “I help teachers develop effective approaches, techniques and appropriate activities for teaching skills. If I would not have studied abroad, I would not have confidence to provide the training”.

Please donate to help give young people in Myanmar the right to learn without persecution.

https://tinyurl.com/ProspectBurma