

Peeking Behind Burma's Bamboo Curtain: Australian Institute of International Affairs Victoria Myanmar Study Tour 2013

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To paraphrase a former Australian minister, Myanmar is the international community's "newest darling". After decades of self-imposed isolation following Ne Win's ill-conceived "Burmese Way to Socialism", and the subsequent State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) (renamed State Peace and Development Council – SPDC – in 1997) flowing from pro-democracy uprisings in 1988, the country is re-engaging with a world that largely left it behind in 1962. Consequently, there is much ground to cover before Myanmar can return to something resembling the prosperity it once enjoyed.

Prior to 2011 Myanmar was in international exile, counting few states among its friends and moving closer to regimes like North Korea. China, recognising Myanmar's strategic value and natural resources, poured money into the country, but seems not to have bought lasting influence in Nay Pyi Taw. Gross human rights violations contributed to Myanmar's isolation from the West and the paranoid atmosphere of military rule isolated the people from each other. The SLORC battled to douse multiple rebellions in Myanmar's ethnic extremities, signing a number of ceasefires in the 1990's, while continuing bloody repression elsewhere.

The United States and United Kingdom led in applying sanctions, seeking to punish the SLORC/SPDC and force a realignment of priorities. The consequent restriction on aid funding – to what had become one of the poorest countries in South-East Asia (as a consequence of the Burmese Way to Socialism), hurt the people more than the regime. Pro-democracy figure Daw Aung San Suu Kyi continued to languish under house arrest, released periodically only to be interned again, once the regime considered her freedom a threat to national security.

It is difficult to pinpoint when things began to change. On the AIIAV's visit, some pointed to Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt's 2003 release of the "roadmap to democracy", though it inspired little confidence at the time. There was speculation it may have been when the army's military intelligence unit (led by Khin Nyunt) was purged after his arrest in 2004, leading to the dismantling of the feared secret police. Then there was the 2007 "Saffron Revolution", where sparked by rising costs of basic commodities like fuel, tens of thousands of monks led a pro-democracy uprising across Myanmar; the SPDC shot thousands and imprisoned thousands more. Reported discontent at the order to attack monks, revered in deeply Buddhist Myanmar, forced the regime to begin to take reform seriously. International sanctions, meanwhile, were further tightened.

It is also realistic to point to the first thaw in the frozen economy following the demise of the Burmese Way to Socialism in 1988. Small businesses were allowed to start, and openings in the economy paved the way to wealth for a number of individuals, most of whom aligned their business interests to the regime. Others point to Cyclone Nargis in 2008, during which Myanmar's southern delta region was brutally pummelled in a storm that killed over 80,000, with a further 50,000 missing. It is estimated around 2.5 million Myanmarese were affected. State leader Senior General Than Shwe initially refused international aid, gambling survivors' lives against a perceived threat to the regime. Images of aid-laden French and US navy ships being turned away from Myanmar, hardened the world's view against the SPDC.

The demonstrable failure of government to safeguard its own people, and its begrudging acceptance of outside assistance laid bare the uncomfortable truth about modern Myanmar. To protect the military (usually known by the Burmese word for the armed forces, Tatmadaw) and to protect the government, the SPDC could no longer ignore the country's enormous economic and social challenges. Addressing these issues would require help from the West, which would not come without reform.

At a glance, the 2010 election seems an inauspicious marker of budding change. Based on a 2008 constitution criticised for enshrining the military's position, boycotted by the National League for Democracy (NLD) and rife with accusations of electoral fraud, the election gave the Myanmarese their first unexpected champion in a generation, former Prime Minister and Army General, U Thein Sein. In November 2010, Daw Aung San Sue Kyiv was freed and encouraged by the first buds of reform, which allowed her party to contest parliamentary by-elections in 2012. The NLD ran in 44 seats. It won 43, including a seat for Daw Sue. The bamboo curtain had begun to part; daylight was on the other side.

The Tour

Seventeen members of the Australian Institute of International Affairs Victoria (AIIAV), including representatives from their WA and ACT branches, travelled to Myanmar between April 20 and May 4 2013 under the guidance of former Ambassador to Burma Christopher Lamb and Victorian member Robyn Byrne. In two weeks, the group was introduced to people from across a spectrum of Myanmar communities; from government, including ministers, members of the ruling USDP and opposition NLD, non-government groups such as the Myanmar Red Cross, religious groups including monks and a non-governmental product of big business, the Htoo Foundation; as well as those working in the health and education sectors, the tourism industry, the former underground media, business councils, think-tanks and universities



(for the full list of organisations and the meeting schedule refer to Appendix I).

The tour group visited six main population centres across the south, central, and eastern areas of the country: Yangon, Nay Pyi Taw, Bagan, Mandalay, Inle Lake and Taunggyi. In each, under the insightful and careful instruction of our Asian Trails guides Snow, Sai, Min and Ma La, tour members experienced a small portion of Myanmar's beautiful, elemental, and tragic history. From the awe of the Shwedagon Pagoda to the extensive cultural precinct of Bagan, Mandalay's end-of-empire beauty, and the bucolic simplicity of Shan State, study tour members had the chance, if ever briefly, to engage Myanmar's complicated cultural and historical tradition.

Tour members received an exceptional level of access to decision-makers and other prominent persons, primarily driven through Chris Lamb's extensive contact list and subtle persuasions. The AIIAV's influence was widely promoted before each meeting, with those met hoping this influence and knowledge gained in Myanmar will translate into a greater understanding in Australia of the complexity of issues facing this country.

It is relevant that the study tour took place close on the heels of the formation conference of the Australia-Myanmar Institute in Melbourne in March 2013. Several tour members took part in the conference, which contributed a great deal of perspective on the main issues confronting modern Myanmar, as well as those relevant to the country's bilateral relationship with Australia.

The various meetings in Myanmar, across all organisations and geographic locations, informed the tour group's knowledge of the following key areas:

- Governance
- Foreign relations, sanctions, and the economy
- Religion and civil society
- Education
- Health
- Culture, heritage, and environment

In each of these areas, tour members were able to gain considerable insights, leading to a growing understanding of the competing priorities and challenges in Myanmar; for example, development versus heritage protection and economic development versus emerging avenues of corruption, among others. These can be summarised into a few broad and overarching findings:

1. The need to build capacity in the public sector and address the poor state of core services like health and education.
2. The management of economic development, overwhelming international interest, and avoiding the resource curse.
3. Optimism in the stickiness of the democratic transition and the critical nature of the 2015 elections.
4. Protecting Myanmar's vast and diverse cultural heritage – from the cities to the countryside; antiquity to the colonial era and beyond.
5. "Australia present at the rebirth of Myanmar democracy" – enthusiasm and gratitude for Australia's positive history of engagement.
6. The 2014 chairmanship of ASEAN and the 2013 SEA Games: Myanmar's re-engagement parties.

The group was impressed by the knowledge and wisdom of the Myanmar interlocutors, exemplifying that Myanmar is not a country to be rebuilt from scratch – far from it, but one in which talented people need to be given opportunities to deploy their skills and where existing capacity needs to be deepened.

This report has been compiled with the assistance of several tour members who have made direct contributions to the text, acknowledged as appropriate. A stand-alone photographic collection showcasing Myanmar’s extraordinary cultural and environmental heritage is included in Appendix II.

Governance

While the speed and scale of Myanmar’s transition from military autocracy to “disciplined democracy” may surprise observers, it is worth noting, as pointed out by Australian Ambassador Bronte Moules, “that the military has long had a plan for a transition to democracy, it is just no one trusted it would be followed”. This scepticism is understandable in a country where the last attempt at a democratic process, the 1990 election, resulted in the annulment of the outcome, the imprisonment of thousands of NLD members and the attempted eradication of the party from public discourse.

In the AIIAV’s discussions with a broad cross-section of prominent Myanmarese, including Toe Zaw Latt – head of the Democratic Voice of Burma, U Myint, respected economist and head of the Myanmar Development Resource Unit, and U Win Htein, a former political prisoner and now a senior NLD representative in the Pyitthu Hluttaw (the lower house of the national Parliament), it became apparent that in Myanmar there is a cautious belief that the democratic transition might be real.

Common to each discussion, particularly with Myanmarese outside the military’s influence, is the absolute criticality of the 2015 election in consolidating the democratic gains of the last three years. The Tatmadaw, however, is not a monolith. There are elements that are more receptive to reform and those that are outwardly hostile. Speculation by some of the people that AIIAV members met, was that it is these more regressive elements of the military who are responsible for agitating intercommunal violence around the city of Meiktila, as well as stoking the continued ethnic conflict in Rakhine State. The endgame of these conservative elements is the continued primacy of the army in Myanmar, as a bastion against the dissolution of the union.

Against these elements stands the country’s leadership. President Thein Sein, handpicked by former Senior General Than Shwe, and described by U Myint as a “likeable, affable man...who has done something of historic importance”, has helped to move Myanmarese and the international community alike to trust in the country’s capacity to change.

Thein Sein’s address of long-ignored issues like poverty and the dilapidated nature of essential services such as health and education were praised in multiple forums across the AIIAV’s two-week tour. After decades of wilful denial by Myanmar’s leadership, that the country had not only fallen behind but was failing in the provision of even the most basic services, the new leadership has admitted there are problems and is moving to confront these. However, as discussed later in this report, the enormity of addressing these challenges should not be underestimated.

While there is consensus on the goodwill and genuine engagement by Myanmar’s political leadership in opening up the country to change, there is an equally strong consensus that Myanmar does not have the capacity to follow through. During her briefing, Ambassador Moules emphasised the difference between rhetoric and application, and the challenges of turning good intentions into outcomes.

The bureaucracy is simply not equipped to meet the inflated expectations of their superiors. This is not surprising considering the dual weaknesses of a tightly controlled martial society with a dilapidated education system – hardly an environment conducive to critical or creative thought. Here, tour members will note the lag in the approval of their visitor visas, despite the Myanmar government’s statement of public openness to tourism.

The challenge of capacity building is nested within the wider narrative of the political and economic transformation occurring in Myanmar. As the experiences of Eastern Europe will attest, undertaking both activities simultaneously is an enormous task. The magnitude should not be underestimated, especially considering the very low economic base from which the country is seeking to build. Improving education standards, both in schooling and the workplace, with a consequence of building mindsets for success in the modern world, could take generations. Also, recognising the needs of previous generations (who were denied an education during this period), and the need to catch up.



Importantly, however, the process is beginning. Recognition is the first step.

In addressing these issues, Myanmar must also address the most basic application of governance; how much is enough? To a foreigner, Myanmar appears to be over-governed, with the consequence of diverted and potentially wasted resources that could be better applied to service delivery and the provision of basic infrastructure.

There are approximately four levels of government:

1. The national level.
2. The seven Burman divisions and seven ethnic states.
3. The township.
4. The village or urban ward (further divided into ten-house groupings).

Each of these levels includes an elected assembly and varying levels of administrative assistance. There appeared, also, to be some confusion about the delineation of responsibilities for each level and what seemed to be much double-handling. To illustrate this, U Win Nyin – Intha tribe leader and Shan State parliamentary representative in Nyaung Shwe – described the lengthy process for approving a new development in his township, using health and education projects as his examples.

According to U Win Nyin, the township leadership, elected from Shan village leaders (themselves emerging from ten-house group leaders) makes an initial decision as to whether a new school or hospital is required. This proposal must then pass the state legislature in Taunggyi, which then in turn, will need to make a submission to Nay Pyi Taw. Much time elapses here, with the local proposal now at the mercy of central government bureaucrats, who may not have the ability to make an informed decision. At this point in Myanmar's development, there is a simple lack of capacity in state and central government bureaucracies – and distance does not help. U Win Nyin said it is common for township leaders to bypass the Shan State level and send representations direct to Nay Pyi Taw, as this is where the money comes from.

All of this occurs before political considerations are overlaid, further convoluting an already muddy process. Add to this a notoriously unreliable tax system (the Australian Embassy estimated that around 2 per cent of Myanmar's pay tax), and the subsequent highly constrained fiscal environment, it is clear how projects in outlying areas like Nyaung Shwe do not receive the deserved attention from Nay Pyi Taw, unless they have a patron in the leadership.

It is also worth noting, in this discussion of capacity, that the central government does not even have an accurate record of Myanmar's population. The last census was conducted in 1983, with current estimates ranging from 44 million to 65 million (for example, Australia has settled on 62 million; the US government on 55 million). Clearly there are limitations to the breadth and efficacy of Nay Pyi Taw's administration.

Here we must note also, the exceptional access afforded the AIIAV in Shan State, where the group was able to meet with an Intha village headman Khin Zaw Oo, as well as Intha tribal leader U Win Nyin; in Taunggyi, the Red Cross and health and education officials of the Pa-O minority. The visit provided a crucial contrast, offering a perspective on the Union of Myanmar's delicate balancing act between many different ethnic groups with unique histories and social organisation far distinct from the Burman, who dominate the key Myanmar institutions. The Shan, as one of eight "major national ethnic races", are further split into tribes, of whom, the AIIAV tour group met members from two, the Intha and the Pa-o. This is a microcosm of the broader situation across Myanmar, where there are 135 recognised and distinct ethnic groups.



Corralling many disparate groups into a functioning state is an incredible challenge and one that has, to this point, resulted in a virtually constant civil war in Myanmar's ethnic extremities since independence in 1948. The AIIAV met a former Pa-O rebel commander, U Ngwe, now the general manager of the Golden Isle Cottages hotel, where the tour group stayed. The hotel was built as a result of the ceasefire agreement between the Pa-O National Organisation and the then-Myanmar Prime Minister, General Khin Nyunt, using income derived from a ruby mine, which was part of the agreement.

Ceasefire agreements with various rebel groups across the country have been progressively signed since the early '90s. However, there are ongoing rebellions across the country, including in the south of Shan State and in Kachin State, with tens of thousands displaced and rumours of human rights abuses by all combatant parties. Resolution of these disputes is one of the clearest challenges to Myanmar's development; indeed, it may even require alteration to the country's governance structure.

The open reception the group experienced in Nyaung Shwe followed on from a meeting hosted by the Mayor of Yangon, U Hla Myint. As at most of the group's meetings with government leaders, U Hla Myint received the group in a highly formal atmosphere in Yangon Town Hall. Discussion ranged across the priorities for the city and his vision for it, and included an opportunity for the group to present him with a book gift from the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, which he warmly reciprocated.

This meeting was also an opportunity to discuss the City Council's wish to see historic buildings in the city preserved. This was taken further at a meeting with Daw Moe Moe Lwin, Director of the Yangon Heritage Trust, who is most appreciative of Australia's support for the Trust and its work to identify, catalogue and protect the city's extraordinary and abundant architectural heritage.

The discussion of Yangon's heritage and a tour to some of the more important buildings also helped the group see buildings whose heritage precedes British rule, including the amazing buildings and history of Bagan and Mandalay, and the timeless traditions of the lake-dwelling population on Inle Lake, east of Taunggyi in the Shan State. All this impressed on the group the diversity of Myanmar and the wealth of its heritage and traditions. These aspects of the tour are well documented in Appendix II, the photographic record of the study tour.

It came as no surprise, with this background, for the group to see that within Myanmar there are many voices – including within the military – calling for constitutional reform of governance. In the ethnic states like Shan, there is support for a federal system that devolves power for the provision of services to states and divisions, while retaining for the national government responsibility for key areas like security, foreign affairs, fiscal and monetary policy (although most federalists also want to return varying degrees of taxing power to the States). The military, meanwhile, is opposed to the

relaxation of central control and the devolution of the Union of Myanmar (and any subsequent erosion of its primacy).

The capital Nay Pyi Taw, of all places visited and perhaps most unexpectedly, embodies the complexity of modern Myanmar. The construction of a new capital is in keeping with the finest tradition of the kings of old Myanmar, where a new capital was constructed to bury the legacy of the deposed. However, despite the SPDC's most strident effort, the new seat of power does not come close to replicating the grandeur of Bagan or Amarapura, or even old Rangoon.

Nay Pyi Taw was ostensibly chosen by the former regime to provide the space for growth that Yangon could not provide. There may be other reasons, hinted at by those with a penchant for conspiracy; for example, an Australian miner encountered in a bar in Yangon explained how he was told, solemnly, by a highly educated local colleague that Nay Pyi Taw was deliberately built in a satellite blackspot, to hide the capital from the US military. Vagaries of surveillance aside, the new capital is further from the coast and so from potential amphibious invasion, which may have provided some measure of reassurance to the SPDC leadership.

Nay Pyi Taw is a place where, as Chris Lamb described, the government is "trying to build antiquity as fast as it can". A grandiose replica of the Shwedagon Pagoda, the Uppatasanti, is one of the city's most dominant features. An impressive structure, it nevertheless pales in comparison to its elderly archetype in Yangon and on the day the AIIAV visited it was, like most of the capital, sparsely peopled.

The other prominent feature of Nay Pyi Taw is the enormous parliamentary complex, the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. To use the term "sprawling" is to be embarrassingly conservative: the 31-building complex (to represent the 31 planes of existence in Buddhist cosmology) is enormous and layered throughout with marble, teak and gold leaf, trying mightily to impress and inspire awe. Many tour members, however, settled on a comparison with Ceausescu's Palace of the Parliament in Bucharest: a criticism of the complex's perceived wastefulness and detachment from everyday Myanmar life.



The Hluttaw is divided into two houses:

1. The Amyotha, or upper house with 224 MPs: 12 representatives from each of the fourteen states and divisions (168 total) and 56 representatives from the military
2. The Pyitthu, or lower house with 440 MPs: 110 from the military and the rest elected in single member "first-past-the-post" electorates.

Parliament has convened a committee to review the constitution. It will consider a number of options including different forms of federalism and a move to proportional representation. The latter option partially explains the USDP's and the military's support to investigate constitutional change, as the current electoral system would, on the basis of the results of the 2012 by-elections secure an NLD landslide in the 2015 election.

Proportional representation allows some measure of protection against this. The NLD is, therefore, opposed to electoral change. While U Win Htein indicated poor voter education as the reason behind the NLD's opposition, it is clear that any move away from first-past-the-post would severely impact on the size of its expected majority and so, act as a conservative bulwark. Parliamentary wrangling continues on what Daw Aung San Suu Kyi lamented as "one of the most difficult constitutions to amend in the world". For her, the prize is the presidency (which will require a change, lifting the ban on Myanmar's president having a foreign spouse or children). The question is how much she would be prepared to offer in return.

Foreign Relations, Sanctions, and the Economy

Despite its current situation, Myanmar stands apart from other developing countries because, as Michael Hassett from AusAID relayed, it had a functioning system in the past and so, perhaps tauntingly, the memory remains. The Burmese Way to Socialism severely crippled a country that in 1962 enjoyed a GDP more than three times that of Indonesia and twice Thailand, leaving it as one of the poorest in the region. By 2010, the IMF estimated that Myanmar had the lowest per capita GDP in South-East Asia, achieving what "The Economist" magazine described as "a great leap backward, just as the rest of Asia was enjoying record growth".

Myanmar is rich in oil, gas, minerals, teak and other commodities, and was once considered the rice bowl of Asia, a title it has since ceded to Thailand. During the economic mismanagement of Ne Win, however, the country was barely able to feed itself. The brutality of the SLORC and its repudiation of the 1990 election result encouraged many Western countries, including the US and the European Union, to apply heavy sanctions on Myanmar. The regime turned to its neighbours, particularly China, Thailand and Vietnam, for goods and investment denied by these sanctions. As a consequence, Myanmar moved closer to the Chinese orbit, as the emergent superpower poured billions of dollars into projects like the Kyaukpyu-Kunming gas pipeline.

However, it appears Chinese investment is as contentious in Myanmar as it can appear in Australia. A briefing from the Myanmar Institute of Strategic and International Studies (MISIS) noted a few of the challenges facing Chinese investment, not the least of which is the contention that it is exploitative. For example, the AIIAV was told that the gas pipeline snaking across the country is not being built with Myanmar labour, which they say prompted President Thein Sein to make a point about the economic, social, and environmental responsibilities of development. The president is supportive of the pipeline, referring to it in numerous media reports as "mutually beneficial", but is coming under increasing pressure to hold the Chinese accountable for construction practices, particularly from community groups in the Shan State who say the project has resulted in the displacement of villages and is contributing to violent confrontations with the army.

Geostrategically, and some may argue culturally, socially, and politically, Myanmar lies at the crossroads between India and China. Both countries are seeking to deepen their interests in Myanmar. India, in particular, is hoping to open access to the Bay of Bengal for its land-locked northern states through construction of a multimodal port in Sittwe. China is seeking a similar Indian Ocean-side port arrangement, as is Thailand.

MISIS raised the possibility of rebuilding roads through Myanmar connecting India and China, not only providing linkages between China's western regions and India (an obsession for empire-builders on both sides since the Han Dynasty) but also stabilising insurgent ethnic states through economic development, textbook pacification. With the lifting of Western sanctions it is possible that these and other large-scale construction projects may become attractive, as companies in the investment-starved West seek lucrative development opportunities. Balancing the relationship between two historic rivals is difficult, but is further complicated by the involvement of the US, now keen to broaden its relationship with a country that could provide a pivotal link in its own geostrategic hedge against China.



The most visible effect of sanctions on Myanmar was to keep the country free of the familiar retail multinationals that dot other Asian cities, like McDonalds, Starbucks, and Mercedes Benz showrooms, though this is soon to change. Visitors to the country also see the dilapidated housing, barely functioning buses and Japanese cast-off cars that are still right-hand drive (motorists also drive on the right: a recipe for traffic chaos) and so one can readily understand the extent to which sanctions affected the lives of ordinary Myanmar people.

Contrast this austerity with the hotels the AIIAV stayed in; plush monoliths with interiors laden with polished marble floors and teak furnishings, swimming pools and well-stocked bars. These were built during international sanctions (the most recent of which were only lifted in May 2013) and prove the most tangible argument against their effectiveness. Those with connections still continued to live well while the majority of the Myanmar people shouldered an additional burden. This led more than one tour member to query the futility of the US and the EU's punitive approach. This questioning took account of the fact, that while the West promoted its sanctions as the lever which would bring democracy to the country, Myanmar's neighbours took an opposite approach. Myanmar was admitted to ASEAN in 1997, with such member states as Indonesia and Thailand stating their belief that engagement would bring reforms which would lead the country inexorably and quickly to its own democratic transition. Some observers date the regime's commitment to real economic change and the start of movement towards democratic reform to this early period of ASEAN engagement.

It is open to speculation as to the degree, that sanctions encouraged the SPDC to pursue democratic reform. What is not in doubt, however, is the extent to which sanctions hurt domestic civil society, seen by the AIIAV through the lens of organisations like the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf in Yangon (described in 'Religion and civil society') and countless other groups by denying them funds to support the most marginalised and vulnerable, in what is already one of the region's poorest countries. The AIIAV found faces for the unintended consequences of sanctions.

The visit to the Mary Chapman School allowed tour members to provide direct assistance, offering to voice the school's needs in Australia, as well as present books and other materials to tens of beaming young children in the school's courtyard. Many also left donations of thousands of kyat, which will provide a small measure of assistance for the school to help young deaf Myanmar people build lives within mainstream society, rather than be marginalised. The school's principal expressed her thanks to the Australian Embassy for small-scale assistance provided in the past, and hoped that they would not be forgotten now that so many new players were seeking funding too.

On multiple occasions across the country, the AIIAV received expressions of gratitude at the limited extent of Australia's sanctions regime (targeted to affect the arms trade and businesses with close links with the military) and Australia's continuous positive engagement with Myanmar. The United Myanmar Federation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry (UMFCCI), led at the meeting by Vice-Chair Dr Maung Maung Lay, referred to Australia as "a reputable and responsible partner" whose expertise, particularly in the mining and agricultural sectors, will be crucial in the redevelopment of these industries in Myanmar.

In a meeting, where he showered Australia with praise, perhaps the most impressive compliment paid by Dr Maung Maung Lay was in his reference to Australia as "the midwife of Myanmarese democracy". He went on to say "Myanmar's democracy is a butterfly, emerging from the caterpillar. It

will never be a caterpillar again.” This gratitude for Australia’s role in both Burmese and Myanmar history, particularly the continuation of Australia’s aid programs while other countries pulled out, was repeated across the country. It heralds an enormous opportunity for other Australians to use what seems an immense amount of goodwill among Myanmar people to forge strong social, philanthropic, and business contacts for mutual benefit.

At the time of the AIIAV’s visit, two events dominated Myanmar’s foreign policy: the 2013 SEA Games and the country’s 2014 chairmanship of ASEAN. Together, these appointments can be seen as a reward and incentive for the ongoing democratic transition. However, both propositions are not without significant challenges. The first presents physical infrastructure problems, the second, administrative infrastructure. Myanmar is constructing stadiums and hotels, and upgrading roads to accommodate athletes and visitors for the games. There is a reasonable expectation these will be finished in time for the opening ceremony in December, but there is less assurance in the administrative infrastructure.

Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, U Thant Kyaw, expressed confidence in his country’s ability to successfully hold the ASEAN chair, but acknowledged the significant capacity-building exercises that must take place in the meanwhile. Citing the experience of Cyprus when it held the rotating EU presidency in 2012, U Thant Kyaw indicated a willingness to engage with foreign institutions (like the AIIAV) to assist in honing key skills required by Myanmar bureaucrats to handle their increasing responsibilities. He acknowledged the failure of the old regime’s system of training public servants, particularly the lack of creativity and autonomy, and the need to “align with a new way of thinking and working”. The challenge ahead is immense, while the countdown to delivery is not slowing.

Conversations with both the Foreign Ministry and MISIS inevitably broached intercommunal violence. In particular, there were questions about how Buddhist attacks on Muslims in Meiktila and the ongoing displacement and non-recognition of the Rohingyas in Rakhine State were affecting Myanmar’s relationships, particularly within ASEAN (as Malaysia and Indonesia are both members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation – highly critical of Myanmar). Issues within Rakhine have garnered the most media coverage, as U Thant Kyaw and his colleagues readily acknowledged. He, and some others during the visit told the AIIAV how difficult they found it to give adequate explanations of the government’s wish to see differences resolved peacefully. It was clear that this is a greater problem than might otherwise have been the case, because the rapid opening up of the country to the internet and social media, as well as foreign journalists, has left an inexperienced and sometimes incapable bureaucracy at a loss as to how to do its work and get its message across. This is perhaps reflected by what the AIIAV perceived as relative silence on the Rohingya’s plight, even by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

The problem is entrenched and its explanation hotly contested. What is beyond disagreement, however, is the scale of the humanitarian tragedy and the effect displacement is having on innocents caught between a stretched Bangladeshi government happy to outsource responsibility and a Myanmar government unwilling to risk political capital on a Muslim minority. Non-government groups, like the Htoo Foundation and the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) are providing gradually increasing amounts of aid to Rakhine State for the care of internally displaced persons. However, as head of the MRCS Professor Tha Hla Shwe explained, aid efforts are hampered by the poisoned atmosphere suffocating Buddhist/Muslim relations in Myanmar. The organisation’s celebrated local volunteers network is rendered useless by the reprisals wrought on locals or their families, who are seen assisting Rohingyas (seen as Muslim intruders siphoning scarce resources). The result of this is that the MRCS must bring in volunteers from across the country, increasing the costs and inefficiencies that in turn reduce the amount of aid to be provided.

There is recognition of the need to control the pace of development within Myanmar, as sanctions are lifted and foreign investment flows into the country. Government officials, as well as the UMFCCI and MSIS, clearly recognised the great challenge in finding the correct balance between encouraging growth and guarding against exploitation by parties with eyes on abundant, untapped, resources. The president’s advisor U Myint indicated that (in a faint echo of the Resource Rent Tax debate in

Australia), as the people own the country's resources, the government must work carefully to ensure there are adequate returns for their extraction.

In addition, the UMFCCI, while naturally a pro-business organisation, was mindful to point out Myanmar naiveté in international business and the subsequent need to engage methodically and carefully with the thousands of companies considering a move into the market, to avoid being taken advantage of. If economic development is carefully managed, not too fast to cause social rupture or trigger the resource curse, and not too slow that the international community loses interest and moves onto their next 'darling', tremendous opportunities are soon to open for the millions of Myanmar. There is much reason for optimism here, provided steadying hands, such as U Myint, can temper what will be a growing eagerness to move (too) quickly.

Religion and civil society– *Susanne Chapman*

Religious groups occupy an important position in Myanmar civil society, providing services in many sectors the government is currently unable including health, education, and services for the disabled.

The AIIAV met the Anglican Archbishop of Yangon, the most senior non-Buddhist religious figure in Myanmar, at his residence in the city. Archbishop Stephen is from the Karen State and prior to his anointment, was a bishop in that State. Before he was trained in the clergy, Stephen was imprisoned for two years while authorities searched for his brother, a dissident. While incarcerated, Stephen was tortured, continuing to suffer until his brother was found, and then he was released. The fact that Stephen had served in the Myanmar Air Force seems not to have protected him from imprisonment – illustrating to the AIIAV what seemed to have been a particularly Burman leadership point within the Tatmadaw and hence its aspiration to retain control of the nation into the future.



The Anglican Church, and most other Christian denominations as well as some Muslim and Hindu groups, established many schools in Myanmar during British rule – schools which were subsequently lost to the faiths when education was nationalised under Ne Win. Archbishop Stephen described how the church is establishing early childhood education centres throughout the country. It also runs the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf, a school for the blind, some small trade training centres, an outpatient clinic, and programs for the empowerment of women.

Funds for restoration work came to the Myanmar church from the United Kingdom after Cyclone Nargis devastated the Ayeyarwady (Irrawaddy) Delta. These funds also enabled the church to buy land for rubber production, to support Kachin refugees, and to provide theological education at the Holy Cross Theological College next door to the Archbishop's residence. The AIIAV also learned of a project initiated from Melbourne that is seeking to

provide assistance in establishing land titles for land held by the Anglican Church.

After a discussion with the Archbishop, the AIIAV was escorted to visit the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf run by the very impressive and confident administrator Daw Christina Nyunt Nyunt Thein. Founded by Englishwoman Mary Chapman in 1920, the school was started from a rented house in Yangon. At that time there were doubts the deaf could be taught to speak, read and write and these doubts were exacerbated by a tendency for the Buddhist Myanmar to believe disability to be a sign of indiscretions in a previous life.

In 1923 Mrs Chapman bought the school's present premises in Yangon and commenced training teachers. A testament to her methods and administration, the school continued to flourish after her return to England in 1930. During the 1960s, the Mary Chapman School was able to avoid nationalisation (possibly because of its mission). Attendance is free but parents who can afford to pay

are encouraged to do so. Hearing aids are provided while students are in attendance but cannot be taken home, as they are too expensive to be damaged or lost.

Daw Christina's commitment to the school was palpable and she brimmed with equal enthusiasm and frustration at the challenges she faced simply to keep it running. She described attending overseas conferences on teaching the deaf as part of her continued struggle to attract overseas funding for the school. Donations come from various Christian agencies and from a small numbers of visiting tourists. Signifying the quality of the school's teaching staff, there are sign language books written by the teachers themselves. Daw Christina informed the AIIAV that it was possible for children to proceed to normal schools after a time at Mary Chapman. Vocational training is also available.

In Mandalay the AIIAV met with a Buddhist monk, the Venerable Wiza. He has built a small school near Sagaing, a major but poor town outside of Mandalay. Remarkably, Ven Wiza received a seeding grant for his school from the Australian author Di Morrissey. There are currently 100 students taught by 10 teachers, who received a three-month training course before commencing. While the school has adopted the national curriculum, Ven Wiza made clear his criticism of it as "parrot learning" and indicated how he wanted to improve the delivery of education in Myanmar through training new teachers for his school. All children are welcome at his school and there are no fees charged.

The AIIAV also visited a very large residential monastic school for both girls and boys, at Phaung Daw Oo in Mandalay, where the enrolment is not based on religion and no fees are charged. Founded in 1993 by two monks with science degrees, the school currently has 189 teachers and 7376 enrolled students. In 1996, the school's first foreign benefactors, World Vision Australia and UNICEF, together provided a capital fund of \$US10,000. Today the salaries budget alone is \$US12,000, which allows for about \$US63.50 per month per teacher.



While a monastic school, the Myanmar government accredits its kindergarten-to-high school curriculum. Some of its vocational activities include carpentry, tailoring, offset printing, microcredit banking and computer training. The students, aged from 5 to 16, may be children who nearly dropped out of school forever due to difficult financial circumstances or the death of their parents during Cyclone Nargis. The monastic school offers them a second chance.

While visiting the school, the AIIAV joined a group in a classroom and spoke to some of the students. One girl, in a reflection of a common story across Myanmar, told us she wanted to stay on at the school but her father was urging her to return home to work on the family farm. The girl was told she was wasting her time; she would not be able to get a job. Her story epitomised the struggle by organisations, religious and secular, to overturn what in some parts of the country is an entrenched attitude against formal education. The young girl is receiving support from the school's staff to continue her studies, yet the broader issue of promoting the intrinsic value of education remains.

Education – John Webb

Editor's note: John Webb was in Burma in mid-1988, based at Rangoon University on an AusAID project to finalise a collaborative PhD program with a consortium of WA Universities. The project was aborted in the turmoil and violence that followed the August '88 crackdown and the imposition of harsher military rule.

At the Australia-Myanmar Institute foundation conference in Melbourne on March 18, Professor Martin Hayden of Southern Cross University and Prof Anthony Welch of Sydney University presented an overview of Myanmar's higher education system. The AIIAV tour's engagement with Myanmar's higher education world was greatly assisted by this presentation, providing context that would inform our impressions and understanding during the study tour program.

Discussions about universities in Myanmar are also discussions about the political and social history of the country and its future development. Yangon University, founded in British colonial times, in 1858 as Rangoon College, a College of the University of Calcutta, one of the three first modern universities established in the British Empire in India. Renamed as Rangoon University in 1920 by merging with a Baptist affiliated Judson College (Baptist missionary Adoniram Judson compiled the first Burmese-English dictionary), it had other Colleges affiliated to it, following the India British model, such as Mandalay College established in 1925.

As President Obama noted in his address at the University in November 2012, the university was 'where opposition to colonial rule first took hold'. The anti-colonial national strikes of 1920, 1936 and 1938 all emerged from the university campus. As the only university in the country, the elites were educated there such as, in the 1930s, General Aung San, the military hero and founder of the nation, Daw Suu's father, as well as U Nu, the Prime Minister and the first Burmese name that I recall as a boy, U Thant, Secretary General of the UN. In the 1940s and 1950s the university could be described as the most prestigious university in South-East Asia, attracting students from across the region.

With the 1962 military coup led by General Ne Win and the imposition of his Burmese Way to Socialism, the university came under military control and the language of instruction changed from English to Burmese. Student protests in 1962 led to the army crushing the on campus protests and reducing to rubble the Student Union building, an event that resonates today. Many students died. Subsequently, many departments were separated from the university to become separate institutions, such as medicine, education, and economics.

Undergraduate teaching was moved to colleges and new universities on the outskirts of the city, and the university faded in quality and reputation. The strategy was to prevent students from gathering and causing political trouble – with the consequence that Burmese universities were ignored by the international education community with no capacity to compete regionally let alone globally.

As Myint Oo commented in his August 2012 article in *University World news*, "employment prospects for university graduates in Burma are unpredictable. The subjects they studied at university often do not match workforce skills requirements. A physics graduate does not become a physicist. He may work as a taxi driver". His open letter had highlighted the failings of the university system and called for reform. For our tour group this comment about jobs was substantiated by our four tour guides: of the four, two were chemists (as the sole chemist in the AIIAV's group, John Webb was on the receiving end of a lot of generally good natured jokes).

The uprising in 1988 emerged from protests on campus leading to the brutal crackdown in August 1988 when hundreds died. With that background, we can begin to understand that Yangon University has a palpable political identity in a country seeking to reform. In our meeting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, she strongly enunciated her vision of 'reinvigorating' Yangon University, rebuilding the Student Union and bringing undergraduates back to the campus. As President Obama noted: 'Parliament has at last passed a resolution to revitalize this university and it must reclaim its greatness, because the future of this country will be determined by the education of its youth'. Daw Suu chairs this parliamentary committee.

Obtaining credit for this renewal is a hotly contested political prize, so it was perhaps not surprising that, in the absence of a scheduled meeting with university authorities, our group was unable to enter the campus grounds. No one currently on campus seemed to have the authority to allow the tour group to simply drive through.

Yangon University is now one, indeed the most famous and recognised one, of about 170 public universities, under the control of 13 ministries, with a sector-wide council only recently established. The Ministers have considerable influence on what the universities choose to do. The funding, curriculum, teaching methods and infrastructure are readily and strongly criticized as inflexible and out dated.

At our meeting with Daw Suu, the matter of research collaboration was raised as a path forward for university reinvigoration. To some surprise, Daw Suu expressed little support for this research-based approach. Her emphasis was strongly on undergraduate teaching as the most urgent and important step in restoring Yangon University. Indeed, her emphasis on the urgent need to focus on jobs creation for such a youthful population means that technical and vocational education should have a high priority, though, as elsewhere in the region, it has little status.



Yangon University does not have its own web site and with restricted access it is hard to reach a good understanding of how best to engage with it. Approaches are being made through embassies for links and cooperation, particularly by universities in the US after President Obama's visit, such as Johns Hopkins University. During our stay, the government mouthpiece newspaper, *The New Light of Myanmar*, led the front page with a report of the Vice President Dr Sai Mauk Kham calling for the establishment of world-class universities. His address was to the first meeting of the recently established Universities Central Council, tasked with coordination of universities that come under 13 ministries.

Regionally, the university is taking cautious steps. The same issue of *The New Light of Myanmar* reported a memorandum of understanding between Yangon University and Hankuk University of Foreign Studies in Seoul, Korea. Also, the Bangkok English daily *The Nation*, reported on 19th of April that Yangon University had signed an agreement covering educational research and the exchange of students and teachers with Thepsatri Rajhabat University in Lopburi, Thailand. The Rajhabat institutions are universities, since their 2004 elevation by King Bhumibol, that have grown, generally over decades, from being schools and teaching training institutions (and have been compared to British polytechnics).

The study tour group moved on to Nay Pyi Taw for meetings at a number of ministries, including Education. We were hosted by the Deputy Minister for education Prof Dr. Ba Shwe, formerly Rector of University in Rakhine State, having his PhD on Rakhine history. His teacher had a PhD from Monash University, one of an estimated one hundred Burmese who had trained in Australia. Dr Ba Shwe had particular responsibility for higher education, with 66 of the 168 (his number) public universities coming under his Ministry, mentioning the Agreement with the ANU, Canberra, which is understood to be at a departmental level. He outlined the challenges and vision for that sector and noted the emergence of private high schools and expected private universities to come up soon. Attending the meeting also was the Deputy Director for overseas training, a key contact for Australian universities. The AIIAV presented to the Deputy Minister letters of introduction and support from Deakin and Melbourne Universities.

Our meeting at Mandalay University, in stark contrast to our exclusion from Yangon University, saw the AIIAV warmly welcomed by the Rector and senior staff from almost all departments, arrayed around a horseshoe shaped conference table. It seems we were the first international delegation to visit Mandalay University since the reform process began, and the staff were a little discomfited by the occasion.

The Rector, Dr Khin Swe Myint, is a physicist with her PhD from University of Hokkaido, Japan and we presented to her letters from universities. She warmly welcomed us and presented an outline of the university, its programs and research themes. In her slides, the Rector noted several international collaborations, particularly with Europe through the Erasmus Mundi and Panacea programs for student mobility as well as a specific one with Cologne University's Geography Department. A group of MBA students went to Bangalore, India for internships. In 2012, the university hosted an international conference in the physics of materials.

After the formalities, there was some time for a further discussion with some of the staff and with the Rector. We discussed the possibility of a small workshop to initiate cooperation. Topics mentioned included constitutional law or environmental chemistry (a contemporary theme for a workshop involving geology, geography as well as chemistry).

Finally, we came across Taunggyi University in Taunggyi, the capital of the Shan States. Our tour guide was a graduate and had the bus drive past the campus. We did not attempt to enter. All was quiet, with examination papers' marking underway, indicated by the tall bamboo screens around the windows of the marking rooms. There are about 5000 students at Taunggyi University, which had been originally established as a college of Mandalay University. It is, however, an important destination for a future study tour as its students come from the disparate language and cultural backgrounds of the Shan State and it provides an opportunity for good insights into the feeder population for the major research institutions in Yangon and Mandalay.

This is clearly a time for change, challenges and opportunities in the higher education sector in Myanmar. International linkages will become a key component of university development and the AIIAV is hopeful that Australian universities will be part of that process.

Health – Virginia Cable

Along with education, a well-functioning health sector is critical to enable all the improvements and reforms the government is seeking. A number of factors hamper the delivery of effective health services, not the least of which is a lack of funding. Dr Pe Thet Khin, Minister for Health, was frank and open during the AIIAV's meeting, outlining a number of areas requiring attention. Particularly, the Minister noted the four biggest killers in Myanmar – tuberculosis, malaria, dengue fever, and malnutrition – and the battle the country faced to curb instances of each. Dr Pe Thet Khin, like other leaders the AIIAV met, was accompanied by his ministry's most senior officials.

Myanmar's expenditure on health is very low. In 2010 -2011, Myanmar spent 74 billion kyat (around AUD 80.6 million) on health. Expenditure has been rising steadily since and is budgeted at 499 billion kyat in 2013-14 (around AUD 544 million), yet this is not enough to rescue the system from fairly dire circumstances. However, it is important to note that raw funding alone is not a tonic; a direction and efficient use of funds is required. Dr Pe Thet Khin recounted advice he received from multiple parties, urging Myanmar to follow the successful model of Singapore (spending 4 per cent of GDP on its strong healthcare system) rather than the profligate and ineffectual US (close to 16 per cent of GDP).

According to Dr Pe Thet Khin, Myanmar has around 900 hospitals, rising to 1000 if army hospitals are included. Various other ministries, like Transport and Labour, also operate their own hospitals. After the various ceasefires with rebel groups in the ethnic states, the central government has agreed to fund hospitals in previously rebel-held areas. The quality of care differs significantly across the hospital network, with army hospitals generally offering the best care and the rest in various states of disrepair. To remediate this, the Minister



indicated that he was negotiating with Johns Hopkins and other US universities, UK gynaecology hospitals, and Japanese, Korean and Thai universities to collaborate with Myanmar's Ministry of Health to improve the country's health system.

One of Dr Pe Thet Khin's key goals is to reach the ASEAN average doctor/ patient ratio. To do this of course, requires the training of new doctors – but this is constrained by the number of university medical schools (currently three, soon to be moving to four with the planned opening of a medical school at Taunggyi University) and the high ration of students to teachers at the existing medical schools, which can compromise standards. 2400 new doctors must be trained each year in order for Myanmar to reach the ASEAN average, but the country's universities are currently restrained from achieving this because of a lack of funding and appropriate infrastructure.

Mental health services have lagged behind even the rudimentary provision of basic health services, with thousands of patients undiagnosed and untreated. However, the Ministry has now budgeted for a psychiatric hospital to open in Mandalay in a sign that mental health may begin to receive greater attention.

In November 2012 Dr Pe Thet Khin came to Australia to attend a tuberculosis conference and was able to meet many people, in the diaspora and in the health sector, eager to assist in the revitalisation of Myanmar's health sector. He was also able to renew a connection with the Universities of Adelaide and New South Wales, and AusAID to assist in fostering collaboration between the Myanmar Ministry of Health and Australian universities.

During the AIIAV's meeting with Dr Pe Thet Khin, Chris Lamb asked whether Myanmar would meet its Millennium Goals in the health care system. The Minister stated Myanmar would be looking for the support of its diaspora to help achieve this.

The Minister noted that in Myanmar there are 135 different ethnic groups, a very diverse geography with remote areas, many languages and 1300 miles of coast. Difficulties in planning for a national health program are amplified because the last census was in 1983 and the figures are now unreliable (the government is planning a census in 2014). It is estimated that 70 per cent of the population lives in rural areas, so rural development, including maternal and child health, is a priority.

Maternal and child mortality is 200 per 100,000 and many mothers are dying of preventable causes. A lot of children are also dying of vaccine preventable disease with elements of malnutrition. Government programs can be planned and delivered in silos. There needs to be integration across government policy the involvement of non-government and commercial sectors. Presentations of malnutrition can be treated but Myanmar must also treat the underlying causes.

Communicable diseases like AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria (Myanmar has the largest number of cases in ASEAN), and Hepatitis B and C kill tens of thousands of people in Myanmar each year. Dr Pe Thet Khin wants to increase government funding to combat these, as at the moment the government is only treating one third of those in need. Funding difficulties means that instead of the Ministry of Health scaling up programs to address these diseases, it experiences great difficulty simply to maintain the status quo. To compound these difficulties, Myanmar now faces the emergence of drug resistant malaria near the Thai-Myanmar border.

The non-communicable diseases of concern to Dr Pe Thet Khin are infections, increased stroke, heart attacks, cancer, road accidents and chronic diseases. In relation to road accidents there is pressure for rehabilitation but no one interested in primary prevention.

Drug addiction is another serious problem in Myanmar, where many – particularly in the outlying ethnic states are afflicted, particularly the young who are bereft of opportunities to divert energy into other activities and lapse into drug use. Areas to the east of the country, near the border with Thailand and Laos in the infamous "Golden Triangle" are rife with opium production, historically used by rebel groups to finance their insurgencies. Production and addiction are linked scourges and

the government must take a multifaceted approach, involving not just law and order but also health and education, to addressing these.

It was noted that with Myanmar's reform program, international NGOs are winding down their programs on the Thai-Myanmar border as refugees begin to return. This presents an additional strain on already-stretched Ministry of Health resources as the burden is shifted back to the state. Ethnic groups, who have for decades, battled the Burman majority for recognition, are apprehensive about the assistance they would receive from the central government. Dr Pe Thet Khin agreed that border people needed to have trust rebuilt with government. He said he supported better health care for the ethnic border states and wanted to see expanded maternal and child health and vaccination programs, indicating that ex-rebels are cooperating with program.

Dr Pe Thet Khin made a point of the need for more than doctors; there is an urgent need for nurses, paramedics and all other kinds of health-care worker. The Minister has agreed to take experienced and skilled ex-rebels into the Ministry of Health as midwives, nurses, healthcare workers, noting the difficulties in balancing a lack of formal qualifications against practical training received in a jungle camp. With ASEAN agreement, a university in Thailand will train these jungle-trained workers, who will receive a new ASEAN-recognised qualification.



Myanmar Red Cross (MRCS)

The AIIAV was received three times by the Myanmar Red Cross Society (MRCS) with great respect and wonderful hospitality. Initially, we met in Yangon with the MRCS' president Professor Tha Hla Shwe and a host of other senior representatives. This delegation also included a staff member provided to MRCS by the Australian Red Cross, Samadhi Selena Marr, Program Advisor for Myanmar.

She was about to return to Australia at the end of her assignment, and the visiting group was able to meet her ARC replacement, Ann-Sofie Lauritzen

Prof Tha Hla Shwe outlined to the AIIAV the role and responsibilities of the MRCS and the society's mission to alleviate human suffering and assist vulnerable people by improving their health and well-being by reducing the impact of disasters on communities.

The MRCS' vision is to be the leading humanitarian organization throughout Myanmar working with and for the most vulnerable at all times. In pursuit of this, activities conducted by the MRCS comprise community-based initiatives in health care and disaster management, as well as the promotion of humanitarian values.

One striking point made, and then reinforced during subsequent meetings with MRCS representatives, was the availability and accessibility of volunteers in a network that spans the breadth of the country, exemplifying the Buddhist belief in assisting others selflessly.

Prof Tha Hla Shwe outlined for the AIIAV a number of the MRCS' partners, including the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, International Committee of Red Cross, Australian Red Cross, Danish Red Cross, French Red Cross, Turkish Red Crescent and Qatar Red Crescent. These groups partner with the MRCS to assist in a variety of ways including disaster risk reduction, community based health development, and road safety. In addition, the Turkish Red Crescent, Qatar Red Crescent and Indonesian Red Cross assist MRCS in conducting humanitarian activities for internally displaced communities in Rakhine State. Singapore Red Cross has also made some substantial contributions towards MRCS work on road safety.

MRCS currently implements 18 projects and programs in 53 townships with support from partners in areas such as reproductive health, child protection, voluntary non-remunerated blood donor recruitment (enabling safe blood donors), maternal, newborn and child health, and outreach prosthetic activities. In 2012 a total of 3,570 Red Cross Volunteers in various states and regions across the country donated about 5,000 blood bags at normal time and during emergencies. To achieve this, a total of 600 volunteers were required.

The MRCS also delivers a number of training programs including first aid training, water safety and life guarding training, basic life support training, and team building training. The society's disaster response and preparedness capacity is strengthened by training volunteers at local and national level. Its efficacy was proved during the devastating Cyclone Nargis in 2008, cyclones in Eastern Shan State 2011 and the ongoing unrest in Rakhine State. In future, the MRCS plans to extend its disaster preparedness interventions to include education on climate change in vulnerable areas.

One of the MRCS' goals, noted Prof Tha Hla Shwe, is to become well-structured, organised and resourced at all levels so that it may deliver quality community based services. However, volunteers are the society's heart and soul. According to 2012 figures, MRCS has 120,166 lifelong members. Without its vast Red Cross Volunteers network, it would be impossible for the society to provide the scope and quality of services it provides to the Myanmar public.

To fund its programs and projects, the MRCS depends largely on funding from partners, income received from renting office space, from its printing press, drinking water production, kit shop, membership fees and donations from the public and government.

Following the meeting with the MRCS headquarters in Yangon, our subsequent engagement with the society was at the Red Cross First Aid station and Ambulance service at the 115 Mile road stop between Yangon and Nay Pyi Taw. This post is completely staffed by volunteers, which again exemplifies the society's dependence on a strong and committed volunteer network. The AIIAV was informed of the role this outpost fills, from being on at all times for events including car accidents, which are prevalent, to providing emergency assistance due to political unrest. This role is huge, with great associated danger, yet it is one strongly embraced by the volunteers met at the station.

We were graciously shown the one and only ambulance at 115 Mile, which is sponsored by Singapore Red Cross and Rotary. It was spotless. A quick look at the medical supplies on board revealed not much other than gloves and a few dressing kits. No actual basic life support gear, which puts into perspective the gulf between the capabilities of a developing country and the medical views, expertise and service that is taken for granted in Australia.

During the meeting it was revealed, almost casually, that one of the volunteers had been called to the scene of a terrible car accident involving a heavily pregnant woman – and then had to deliver a baby when the mother went into labour from the shock of the accident! Without formal training in midwifery but knowledge of first-aid and her experience of giving birth to her own children, this unassuming volunteer saved the lives of both mother and child. All without fanfare or promotion. This is indicative of the unassuming but fiercely dedicated volunteers the MRCS attracts, but one would hope that the MRCS uses these stories to aid its funding drives to support its volunteers. It is heartening to consider the possibilities of a well-funded nation-wide network of volunteers with the dedication and drive of those met by the AIIAV. Substantial hurdles must first be surmounted, not the least of which is finding donors who will submit funding without attaching conditions. This is a work in progress for the MRCS.

The AIIAV's third and final meeting with the MRCS was in Taunggyi in the Shan State. We met with three doctors and two volunteers working on the community-based malaria prevention program. These representatives had travelled all the way from Nay Pyi Taw to meet with us, a substantial distance (over five hours drive) away. It was humbling that they had come so far to meet with us over lunch, but it was also an illustration of their high regard for Australia and our cooperation through the Australian Red Cross and the Embassy.

During the meeting the AIIAV was told that the malaria prevention program is currently being trialled in 60 villages. It is a two-phase initiative: Phase 1 in 2011-2012 and Phase 2 in 2013-2015. The program's objective is to prevent malaria using insecticide-treated nets and long lasting insecticidal nets in high-to-moderate risk villages in ten townships within the Shan State. The villages selected were most prone to malaria i.e. high risk, villages with high vulnerable groups such as migrant and forest workers, highest mortality rate, and most limited access to health services. In keeping with the pilot nature of the program, the villages chosen were also not to have overlapping anti-malaria prevention activities by other implementers, and were also to have a strong pre-established network of MRCS volunteers.

The goal of malaria control in Myanmar is to reduce malaria morbidity by at least 50 per cent and malaria mortality by at least 50 per cent by 2015, as a contribution towards socio-economic development and the Millennium Development Goals. The objectives of the prevention program can be summarised as follows:

- Prevent malaria using insecticide treated nets in high and moderate risk villages in 10 townships
- Strengthen community based malaria control activities
- Strengthen technical and administrative management capacity for malaria control at all levels
- Distribute medication
- Train volunteers, 600 are needed
- Educate public on the importance of hand washing

Importantly, this project has support from the Ministry of Health. It is a key example of the way in which the central government can partner with NGOs and other bodies to deliver improved health outcomes for Myanmar.

As the AIIAV tour wound its way across Myanmar, on the many bus and boat journeys, there were plenty of sightings of dilapidated health infrastructure. Under the stewardship of a reforming government, with strong support from NGOs like the MRCS, it is hoped that these sights will become increasingly rare and that living conditions for all Myanmar people, especially outside of the major cities, will continue to improve. There is a very long way to go but it is heartening to hear, for the first time in decades, a serious enunciation and confrontation of the problems inherent in Myanmar's health system. Identifying these is, hopefully, the first step towards a concerted effort at remediation.

Conclusion

As outlined in this report there are a number of significant challenges ahead for Myanmar, not the least of which is the successful navigation of the 2015 election. If, as expected, the NLD win the election in a landslide, it remains to be seen as to whether and how the military-backed establishment will dutifully relinquish power. President Thein Sein's actions since 2010 allow a cautious level of optimism that the democratic reforms are real and 1990 remains historically distant.

Even if the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi are swept to power this will not be a silver bullet for the country. As U Myint and countless others noted during meetings with AIIAV tour members, Myanmar presents enormous economic, social, cultural, and political problems for a government of any persuasion. The NLD may be able to begin a social healing among the Burmans – but what about the Shan or the Kachin and the others which have been engaged in struggle for their identity now for over 60 years?

Some of these issues were discussed during the group's meeting with Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, but it was not possible to go deeply into the dilemma which a new government will face after the 2015 elections. Much of her commentary on modern Burma (as she prefers to call the country) focuses on the USDP's failure to further economic, social and political reforms, but she did not provide clarity on her own party's intention in these areas. She did, however, make it clear that she wants NLD to begin a period of policy-setting, and AIIAV looks forward to knowing how this will unfold. It needs to be said, as a balance to this point, that the governing USDP party is also unable to describe its real policy intentions. It came to power with the backing of the SPDC government, but knows that in 2015 it will have to have credentials which appeal to the populace if it is to win seats and govern again.

The AIIAV was fortunate to tour Myanmar at this time, to find a country in the opening throes of transition. As we left there was a population-wide ballot for new and cheap (approximately \$A2) SIM cards, introducing, for the first time to the wider public, the connectivity and mobility that we have long taken for granted. Donors and investors alike are queuing at the border. There is a sense that perhaps this is the opening that the country has been waiting for. However, it would be naïve not to take into account the cautionary words of one of the group's tour-guides, who said the country "was about 30 per cent free".

To an outsider it is easy to fall into the trap of believing progress is being made because NLD posters are in the markets and multinational brands are appearing on advertising boards. There are still very dangerous and corrupt elements in Myanmar that will not easily relinquish the levers of control they have been grasping for six decades. Good progress has undoubtedly been made, however, the significant issues of constitutional reform and reforming the health, education, and justice systems remain to be tackled.

There is also the existential question of just what constitutes the Myanmar state and to what degree the ethnic states should be given autonomy or otherwise, under a new constitution. In addition, continuing unrest between the Buddhist majority and Muslim minority threatens the fragile internal

security situation and may provide an excuse for conservative elements in the military to renege on reform and return to autocratic rule.

It is up to tour members to take what they have learned and experienced in Myanmar and consider how best they can assist, in whatever small way, the transition currently underway. Some have promised to find ways to fund the Mary Chapman School for the Deaf, Ven Wiza's school, the Red Cross, to work with Myanmar's justice system to create a digital repository of legislation, or to broadly disseminate the work of the Yangon Heritage Trust and its mission to preserve the city's rich history from rapacious developers. Others are considering ways to link educational institutions in Australia to counterparts in Myanmar, and promoting Australian youths to travel to Myanmar to develop an understanding of the country.

Myanmar has had a profound impact on those fortunate enough to be a part of the 2013 study tour. The AIIAV will continue to watch developments in Myanmar with a keen interest. It is hoped that this focus will not fade as, inevitably, the wheel spins and attention is drawn towards the next "international darling". As a nation with a long and positive association with Myanmar, Australia and its people are, perhaps, uniquely positioned to be able partners in Myanmar's transition. It is a grand opportunity for both countries and one that the AIIAV, in partnership with the Australia-Myanmar Institute, should take a leading role in facilitating.