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Myanmar, Political Violence and Armed Conflict

“Myanmar: Improving Food Options for Displaced Peoples Following Armed Conflict and Political Instability”

Introduction

Despite the vast and impressive technological advancements made in this modern era the issue of food insecurity still plagues the world. Myanmar ranks as the fifth most food insecure country in the world and this shortage of nutritious food (WFP) will only continue to worsen. Armed conflicts between government and rebel groups have forced constant relocation and the unfavorable displacement of the country's civilian population, disconnecting them from reliable sources of food and subsistence. If Myanmar continues down the path it is currently on it will remain at an impasse until it ultimately falls and is dissolved into smaller and more chaotic nations, throwing the entire area into a state of complete infrastructural collapse unless something is done to resolve the situation.

Background

As a citizen of the United States I often take for granted the luxurious and comfortable life I've been able to live. As a first world country the United States has advanced technology and is leagues ahead in terms of infrastructural advancements when compared to countries such as Myanmar. I’m given relatively easy access to all the basic necessities a human would need to survive such as water, shelter, and most importantly food security, which is something the citizens of Myanmar lack in abundance and desperately need.
The history of Myanmar is long and illustrious and establishing context before we dive into our research topic is paramount to understanding the country's current political climate and food insecurity.
While the territory that currently makes up modern Myanmar has long been inhabited by various peoples, its interaction with other countries during the colonial era will provide us with the most context.
During colonial times, Myanmar was under British control and was ruled by the crown although from a distance. Conquered through imperialism as Great Britain sought to expand their territory Myanmar underwent significant political and economic exploitation as well as their resources were plundered to fund the empire that was colonial Great Britain. British control of Myanmar would continue from 1824-1948 (“British Rule in Burma”) until Myanmar would eventually reclaim its independence and be recognized as a sovereign state.

Following their reclamation of independence Myanmar has undergone political instability and has been in a state of unrest as world ideologies clash, greed, and conflict over the distribution and consolidation of government power within the country (Center for Preventive Action).

Currently, Myanmar is home to over 55.1 million people and is 261,228 square miles in total land area with around 219 people per square mile ("Myanmar Demographics 2020 (Population, Age, Sex, Trends) - Worldometer"). Currently that large population favors rural areas without around 65% of Myanmar citizens living in rural areas with 35% living in urban areas. This is in large part due to the underdeveloped status of cities within Myanmar as they favor agricultural trades and progress very slowly within the industrial sector due to the decades of economic isolation (Group) and infrastructural sabotage. This is particularly apparent with their capital city of Naypyidaw. While the city appears to be an urban metropolis, it is very sparsely populated due to the fact that the military junta who currently are empowered designed the city to prevent civilian uprising and protest.

Despite this, the citizens of Myanmar who remain food secure are able to promote healthy living as meals typically consist of steamed rice, a variety of curries, broth, vegetables, and ngapi (Staff). The ingredients found within this meal are typically farmed along the River Irrawaddy, Myanmar's "Food Bowl" and the center of their agriculture.

Not only is the River Irrawaddy plentiful in its resources, Myanmar's tropical monsoon climate is excellent for growing crops despite the downsides that come with the severe challenges that come with the harsh climate (Chan). These challenges can cause nutrient leaching, soil erosion from extreme rains, and crop vulnerability (Chan) as a direct result of the often confusing and unpredictable weather patterns.

Regarding this economic instability Myanmar's primary crop exports are rice, corn, rubber, and dried legumes. On the contrary its main imports are refined petroleum, crude oil, and palm oil. It's important to note that Myanmar's export growth dropped 6.82% from 2023-2024 due to a variety of reasons that will be covered later on as we discover the root cause of Myanmar's food insecurity.

Challenge and Impact

In simple terms, Myanmar is undergoing severe food insecurity due to a complete infrastructural breakdown of the entire region. Since its establishment Myanmar as a territory has been locked in a constant state of turmoil. Similar to Africa, Myanmar never truly recovered from the effects of colonialism even after gaining independence. Existing within a society controlled by a relatively weak democratic leader is extremely disadvantageous for the people of Myanmar as the threat of rebellion is constant. In 2021, this threat became real and sparked the civil war that has caused the severe food insecurity that currently plagues the region. The democratically elected government of Myanmar was overthrown and power was seized by the country's military effectively turning it into a military state.

Following historical recurrences the people of Myanmar naturally oppose the coup and begin to go on strike in order to advocate for change and hopefully remove the military from power. This is where the first problem starts. Due to the constant strikes against the government people no longer have access to the minimum funds required to buy the commodities and goods they once were able to. Couple this with a struggling economy and the fact they were already making very little, and now people are unable to receive the proper nutrition and food becomes scarce as it loses its availability.

Furthermore, the addition of violent protest against the newly installed military regime has caused mass displacement and cut off the general populace from a consistent source of food.
As peaceful protests and strikes plague Myanmar the people, noticing the detrimental impacts the strikes have economically inevitably turn toward more violent alternatives in order to force the military out of power(Koumjian). This in turn leads to violent skirmishes between the new military regime and rebel groups that have formed. As these skirmishes continue the people of Myanmar are naturally displaced as they are forced to flee war torn areas (World Health Organization). Considering Myanmar already has a lackluster infrastructure once these people are displaced and have fled from their respective homes they are now isolated from the natural trade of goods and resources and can no longer access food in the same manner as there are no protocols and regulations in place to provide them with such goods (World Food Programme). This has led to acute hunger throughout the region with around 12.4 million being considered food insecure (World Food Programme) with that number only continuing to rise if a solution isn't found soon.

Expanding on Myanmar's tense political climate, resistance forces and ethnic armies control around 42% of the country while the military junta controls 21%. This notably leaves around 37% of the country under the control of various local militias and other entities. This unclear structure of power allows other neighboring countries to attempt to gain control of the region for their own gain. For instance, China is attempting to consolidate power within the region by establishing protection policy and keeping up relations with the major groups (Babst, 2025). Further international influence could destabilize the region further leading to extended periods of conflict within the region.

Finally Myanmar's tropical monsoon climate despite its excellent benefits regarding crop growth is a huge reason for Myanmar's food insecurity. According to Irrawaddy, around 760,000 acres of crops were destroyed and over 100,000 cattle were killed by severe flooding that was caused by erratic and extreme weather conditions. Yearly Myanmar produces around 60 millions acres of crops (Myint) so by comparison 760,000 seems miniscule, however it's important to remember that not only is Myanmar already infrastructurally not built to sustain any drops in agricultural efficiency, it's currently in the middle of a civil war that has displaced millions and threatened to dissolve the country entirely. This severely affects how efficiently and effectively the government is able to distribute its resources. Combine this with displacement and now the majority of your population has minimal access to your food supply and becomes food insecure.

Exploring Solutions

Considering Myanmar's political climate and the sheer amount of displaced peoples, providing humanitarian aid to those in need is the most pressing factor.
Non-profit organizations such as the World Food Programme, World Health Organization, and UNICEF all provide humanitarian aid to the people of Myanmar however, they cannot provide food and care to the nearly 14 million people who are in desperate need of it. The WFP requires around $184 million in order to maintain its humanitarian food and resilience operations in Myanmar however they only secured $51 million. This extreme lack of funding forced them to prioritize only the most vulnerable groups leaving the majority of the population without a sustainable food source. Providing these organizations with the funding they need to maintain safe and effective operations isn't necessarily a solution as it doesn't work

to fix what has caused Myanmar's severe food insecurity; however, it makes strides to improve the immediate living conditions of some of Myanmar's most socially vulnerable groups.

Secondly, introducing more sustainable farming practices is paramount to ensuring crop efficiency and yield considering how dangerous Myanmar's climate can be to its crops. Techniques such as polycultural farming, crop rotation, and water conservation are key in increasing the amount of overall crop yield farmers have per acre (Thant et al.). Considering Myanmar experiences extreme nutrition deficiency due to the amount of monocropping done, implementing crop rotation allows for the soil to replenish the nutrients it needs to effectively grow crops. For water conservation the idea is self explanatory. Annually, Myanmar uses around 2.2 to 2.6 trillion gallons of water on cropping. Considering the food crisis the country is going through, this allocation of resources is clearly not working in the favor of the people. Instead, dividing up the allocation of freshwater within the area so that a greater percentage of it is devoted to becoming clean drinking water would be much more beneficial to the community.
This method also works in tandem with humanitarian aid as it makes the act of improving Myanmar's food insecurity a team effort and takes some of the economic weight off of the non-profit organizations.

My Recommendation

In my opinion Myanmar's best shot at eliminating the problem of insecurity within its borders would be to implement a food belt in the region, centered around the cultural importance of agriculture, more specifically the meaning of rice within Burmese culture and how it inspires unity, foundation, and community.

In Myanmar, rice is a symbol found at the core of their culture. Found in nearly every meal they consume, rice symbolizes spiritual foundation, representing the hospitality, kindness, and unity of the people. Consequently, the Htamane Festival, one of Myanmar's most significant cultural festivals of the year, is centered around the creation of rice as it brings communities together (*Htamane Sticky Rice Festival*, 2026a).

Taking this into account my solution for Myanmar's food insecurity issue is to create a food belt, stretching along the entirety of the Irrawaddy River as well as its coastline regions. As the name suggests this area of land would be used for primarily agriculture and would become a neutral zone in the midst of the ongoing conflict. Farms would be established along the coastline with local communities coming together to manage the distribution and production of crops. Following the end of every harvest season people from around the state of Myanmar, will come together for the Htamane Festival(*Htamane Sticky Rice Festival*, 2026a) and strengthen the spiritual bonds that hold them together.

This approach inspires unity and collaboration between the conflicting groups as while their ideologies may differ, as humans we all must eat. Considering the food crisis these groups would work together to create sustainable farmland along the coastlines in order to provide food for not just themselves, but the entire region as a collective.

Considering the cultural importance of my solution, its introduction must be inclusive to that. To introduce this plan I propose that we prepare a delegation team of around 5 members. I say 5 in reference to the 5R's outlined in Jennifer Franco and Jun Borras', *The 5Rs in Myanmar: Five principles for a future federal democratic system where rural working people can flourish.* Each delegate would be of Burmese descent and should have meaningful ties to the area and its people. Once delegates arrive in Myanmar they will propose the idea to the current governing body of Myanmar, as well as the many resistance forces and armed ethnic groups. Once the plan has been proposed, the delegates are to leave as to limit foreign interference and it is up to the people of Myanmar to make the decision to implement the food belt.

Conclusion

In totality, the food insecurity in Myanmar has been caused by political conflict and unsustainable agricultural practices. While the issue in Myanmar is dire and progressively worsening every second, if efforts are made the situation can be resolved and Myanmar will thrive again.

Similar to Rwanda, the people of Myanmar have to achieve peace for the sake of peace. Ignoring all selfish ideals they must cast aside their differences and come together to achieve peace, not for the sake of personal gain or world domination, but simply because that is what is right.

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