Cry Tears for Burma

Once, this was Thabyekyaing village, a quiet coastal village in Labutta township, Ayeyawaddy Division.

Once, the laughter of children filled the air as they played football or toke-si-do in the fields and yards.

Once, men went out on fishing boats or worked in the fields. Women planted rice, fetched water and firewood and kitchen fires burnt brightly.

Once, on Sunday mornings, the church bell would ring and people would gather to sing, praise and worship god and listen to the pastor, Rev. Maung Bay's or his son, Pastor Klo Htoo's sermons.

Once, on Lenten days the monastery gong would sound and the Buddhists would go to hear the Sayadaw's sermons while observing a fast.

Once, the village was shady with fruit trees, the gardens with vegetables and the fields green with rice plants or yellow during harvest time.

Now, there is an eerie silence over what once was Thabye Gyaung. The sound of laughter, song and raucous shouting is stilled. The trees, the fields, the houses, school, church, monastery, clinic are no more.

Now, what remains is death and destruction, bloated bodies, shattered lives.

On the night of May 2, the cyclone Nargis with gale force winds, rain and sea water that rose to 17 feet and higher destroyed the village and all the life that had made up that village.

The pastor, Thra Maung Bay, MIT (Burma Divinity School Certificate) Class of 1969 died in that disaster. Once, in 1992 thra Maung Bay had faced flood waters, that time of a political nature in what is known as Bogalay Ayay-Akin (Bogalay Affair). Pro-democracy forces had infiltrated the delta region from across the border. Thra Maung Bay was interrogated, tortured and sent to prison. But once released, he went back to his village and people and ministered to them as best he could in spite of his broken health. His son, Saw Klo Htoo, following the steps of his father went to seminary, Karen Baptist Theological Seminary for his Bachelor of Theology and after graduation became a pastor. But on that fateful night, Pastor Saw Klo Htoo also died, never fulfilling his dream of studying at MIT. Mrs. Maung Bay, a KBTS graduate, survived as she was visiting relatives in Rangoon at that time. Now, she is alone, without family, home and village.

This family's, this village's, tragedy is replicated in the areas struck by Nargis Cyclone, Haingyi Island, Labutta, Bogalay, Daydaye, Pyapon, Mawlamyinegyun and Rangoon and nearby towns. The latest govt. figure of deaths (12 May '08) is 85,000 the final figure will be higher. Relief work is going on but at a slow rate. Relief goods are accepted but not personnel with expertise. Some camps are experiencing medical problems. Some people still in isolated pockets are without food and water. In Bassein, there are over 2000 survivors in Ko Tha Byu Camp with more arriving every day.

In the Myanmar Baptist Convention, the hardest hits are Karen Baptist Convention, Pwo Karen Baptist Conference, and Myanmar Baptist Churches Union and Asho Chin Baptist Convention. KC reported over 39 villages totally destroyed in Bassein area alone and 13 pastors dead. The Self-Supporting Kayin Baptist Churches also report destruction of churches, seminary and houses.

MBC Headquarters suffered damages totaling about kyats 1500 lahks. It was to host the Myanmar Council of Churches Biennial General Meeting May 20-24 but now had postponed to middle of June.

MCC's main meeting hall is wrecked and some glass windows were blown off. Judson church's roof was also damaged and worship services could not be carried out.
MIT's buildings' roofs were lifted off and the computer lab with 12 computers totally water logged. Our newly appointed chaplain, Dr. Khin Kyu Kyu has just moved in to the Guest Apartment and she agrees with Neil and Diana Sowards that the apartment should be named "Falling Waters," though very different from Frank Lloyd Wright's model house, "Falling Waters" in America. Trees fell on Alan Po's, Ashee's and U Tha Wah's houses. The roofs are all gone. Alan and Nyunt moved to Maharsaung Dining Hall just in time.

The Rangoon streets are blocked with fallen trees and electric posts. Water and electricity is a problem. BARS classes have been suspended until further notice. Summer School closed for a few days but have re-started. Master of Ministry classes started today but some students from Bassein area are too busy with relief works to attend.

MICT had pushed back the opening date of 2008-2009 academic year to September because of lack of electricity, water, building repairs and rising costs of rice and other food commodities. MIT will hold a meeting on May 14 on how best to carry on with limited resources. Dr. Simon and Faculty are determined to begin classes as scheduled. The main costs will be diesel oil to run the generators for light and water and food costs. It's a challenge as we face the ATESEA Accreditation team visit in August.

Say Pa and I had the roofing over one bedroom blown off and water in the bedroom so our computer also is water logged. 23 fell in our compound. Some mango and jackfruit trees planted by my mother but still bearing fruit. Workers were very scarce at this time for repair work and cutting trees and clearing the land. Our loss is minuscule compared to the loss of family, homes and villages suffered by so many people.

You will want to know how to respond to this disaster. We certainly need your prayers. The people also need aid to recover from destruction of this magnitude. Please send donations to MCC, MBC, KBC, PKBC who are directly doing ground level relief work. MCC is coordinating with various NGOs and ecumenical partners to provide immediate relief. Send financial help only to trusted individuals. There are many people profiting from this disaster. The merchants are raising their prices and even some relief goods do not reach the victims but are being sold off. So be careful in your response.

MIT needs help with buying 12 computers for BARS program, roofing and other building materials for staff houses, Mahasaound and Ann Judson Villa, diesel to run generators (for now only water is available for Mahasaung where there are 2 section, for male/female use), funds to buy food commodities for 180 hostel students.

Cry for bleeding, suffering Burma - she is so small, her people struggling so long for survival. It seems as if not only political forces but God herself/himself is determined to teach us some sensible lessons. Sermons nowadays sound like platitudes. Our land and our people are being put through the wringer, squeezed dry till there is no more life juice left. Cry with us, cry for us in solidarity in our despair.

Anna May Say Pa  
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Dr Anna May Say Pa is the Vice-Chairperson of The South East Asia Graduate School of Theology (SEAGST). She is also on the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches. She is a friend and confident of Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and has been an advocate for peace and human rights throughout her career. She is the Professor of Old Testament of Myanmar Institute of Theology and was formerly the Principal of Myanmar Institute of Theology.