

Mr. Khong: “And that’s the time I start to learn about the English word called ‘misery.’ Before that I never thought that I would understand the word misery in this deep sense. There’s no words to say just a survival effort at every corner across the country.”

Meghan: *That was an MCC partner in Myanmar, whose real name we aren’t using for security reasons. He’s asked to be called Mr. Khong.*

Today on the show, I’m speaking with Mr. Khong about the challenges partners in Myanmar face in providing emergency relief, and how they’re navigating them.

MCC is responding in Myanmar with humanitarian relief and peacebuilding work. We are supporting local organizations to provide emergency assistance for displaced people, with essential food items, basic medical supplies, and support for income generation and child education.

We also support peacebuilding education, and networking and mentoring grassroots actors working for peace in the country.

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I’m Meghan Mast and you’re listening to, “Relief, development and podcast,” a production of Mennonite Central Committee.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

Meghan: *Myanmar has suffered decades of civil war and military rule. Its modern history is marked by the impact of colonialism and violence. British colonial rule began in the 1800s, stirring up long-standing ethnic tensions that persist today.*

In 2015 the country held its first democratic election in decades, resulting in civilian leadership and power-sharing with the military.

But in February 2021, the military seized power again, plunging Myanmar into crisis. The country is gripped by political instability, leading to widespread violence, mass displacement and destruction of property affecting millions of people.

The situation got worse in 2023 when the military junta intensified airstrikes on minority villages and communities opposing the military take-over. This accompanied egregious human rights abuses including murders, disappearances, torture and sexual violence.

Inflation and humanitarian restrictions are making living conditions even worse, with about a third of the population estimated to require food assistance this year.

But widespread armed resistance is weakening the military’s influence.

So recently, the military began conscripting young people across the country. You’ll hear more about this shortly.

Distributing humanitarian relief is outlawed. MCC’s partners in the region face significant challenges.

With me today to share how he is navigating these dangerous conditions, is someone who works for one of our partners. We talk about the moral obligation he has as a peace worker, livelihoods being impacted, families fleeing from their homes, the unpredictability of the army and the constant worry about being a target.

As I mentioned earlier, he's asked to be called Mr. Khong, for security reasons. This is not his real name. Welcome Mr. Khong. Thank you for speaking with me.

Mr. Khong: *Thank you very much. I'm very glad to be here with you.*

Meghan: *Can you start by telling our listeners why conscription has people so worried?*

Mr. Khong: *So it's very new. And this has forced many young people to run out of the country, everyone is planning to run. People are struggling to get a passport. Because majority of the population in Myanmar don't have passport because they never thought they will be able to go abroad. They never thought they are qualified, and they have financial resources to go abroad. And most of the population don't have passports. In one of the second largest city in Myanmar, we learned that one person died, you know, standing along the line waiting for the passport. So you can see every day people go around 3am in the morning, to get at the front space of the waiting line at the front of the passport office, immigration office. Many young people fleeing mainly to Thailand and Malaysia. And there are many people moving, like with tourist visa and trying to get education visa or work visa from there. And the first intention is just to leave the country. Every family, every mothers with sons and daughters, they have depression. Now this is affecting every family. The conscription law is very bad, the impact.*

Meghan: *And can you explain in a bit more detail why people are wanting to leave the country?*

Mr. Khong: *Yeah, the military is losing many regions, towns at the hands of the resistance groups, arms groups. Many resistance groups are also starting to control many towns in different part of the country. And all arms groups, you know, they have very young resistance groups who were, prior to the coup, who were civilian students, university students, you know, NGO workers, different people. They are, they are starting to control different areas. And people believe that the military is somehow losing the quantity of the soldier who will fight. And they are afraid that they will be brought to the front line. That's one problem. And the second challenge is like whenever the military is you know, whenever there is engagement between the military and civilian people, how the military treat the people is very violent. You know, they will slash, they will punch, so they will even kill you know, that we have already experienced unlawful arrest. You know, in this situation everyone can be arrested and military, actually military can shoot anyone, anytime. Even in the largest city, you know, they don't need justification, there is no rule of law anymore and the history of military, you know, prosecuting the civilian has also been very long on the other side. And the immediate experiences that we learned is also very violent. That's one point. And military is often understood to use human shields, you know, even if you cannot fight you know, they will bring you to the front line and they will make you, they will use you as a tool for cleaning landmine of resistance groups. So, this has this case has been seen in Rakhine state, they use some Rohingya people to go at the front line, you know, not giving any weapon at the front line, and just clean the row full of landmines from the resistance groups. And finally, most of the public don't see military is doing the right thing. And no one would like to sacrifice for it. Why should we sacrifice our life, you know?*

Meghan: Right, so it sounds like from what you've just described, there is a lot of risk and danger for newly conscripted civilians in the military because they are forced to act as human shields. So civilians are caught in the middle.

I'm curious to hear a bit more about your personal story. How has your life been impacted by all of this?

Mr. Khong: I think I need to talk about my family. Me, uh we have a very small house home in our home in our small hometown. And besides our home there is a small house of my grandfather's home. So we are side by side. But now they have left their house, their home, for around two years. So no one is there. Just leaving the house because of the risk because there are some military operation in that town. And there are also some military camps there. So, every civilian decided to run away. So my family and my mother has and my grandfather's family, they have left their home for two and a half year and they run into very remote mountain, hilly mountain village. And inside there were there also many IDPs there. We have like a small farm where our family works together. And it was the farm was called the farm product was called something they called what they call elephant foot yam.

Meghan: Meghan here, just jumping in to explain that elephant foot yams are a root vegetable that have black, wrinkled skin with a nutty center. Mr. Khong also mentions IDPs, which are "internally displaced people." In Myanmar there are entire communities of people displaced within the country. Mr. Khong goes on to describe the difficulty in harvesting his family's yams.

Mr. Khong: It can be harvested only once in three year. Because of the conflict, the transportation to sell the products you know, all with checkpoints everything closed. And our three-year investment for our family livelihood has been you know, in vain it looks like. So we still have the farm but we have nowhere to sell. And we cannot eat either because it needs another process to become noodles. So, last month there was an airstrike shooting to the IDP communities, like the military just come and fly by and shoot everywhere they see. And my mom got some foot/ankle problem while running. For myself everyday is with worries, you know with conscription law, first and foremost, whether they will announce today where my name will be listed or not. And the second point because I'm working on some human rights before and peaceworks. But what is more risky is the humanitarian because the military think that humanitarian workers are supporting the resilience of communities, those who are not under the control of the military, so they don't feel worried. And that's risky. So, with that risky every morning, you know, always in our head. Besides this, we don't have regular electricity here, it's very hard, we cannot cook. So, everything is direct response solving. And, most significantly, me and my wife can't meet our parents from both sides for around two years because of the travel limitation. But fortunately, somehow we manage to meet them virtually. Yeah, every day, we worry, every night we worry when they will knock our door.

Meghan: You are in such a difficult situation that impacts every part of your life. Amid these dangers, why is distributing aid especially important right now?

Mr. Khong: Not just one people is getting hungry, the whole population, millions of people getting hunger. And in that situation, my peace work also facilitate me to understand in this way, because in my peace studies training, I learned that humanitarian is also one of the aspects of peace work to reduce the consequences of physical violence. If there is no humanitarian [aid], the violence, the mentally and also physically, the victim, the civilian people, the way they experience and the impact they would bear is more severe, you know. And from my peace perspective, also, I understand this like it is my continuous peace work, and also, my

moral commitment there, I feel I cannot be silent in that context. Because even my immediate family is IDPs you know, so it's the IDPs are not very far from me, it's just very close to me, in spirit, I would say.

Meghan: Partners in Myanmar are providing funds for people to purchase food locally and in contexts where that's not possible, they are providing food packages. It's dangerous to distribute humanitarian aid because the military wants to have control over how people access food, so Mr. Khong explained how they manage to do this.

Mr. Khong: The way we work is like, because many churches are hosting IDPs or many churches themselves are IDPs So, church leader, church pastor, they are like they organize the humanitarian support team in every village. So, they support our volunteer, our staff on the ground. We transfer our fund to there via online banking, and then they would withdraw the fund and they will purchase the food item from the local market. And another approach is like for big grant, you know, huge grant with high amount of fund, we can't conduct in kind support, that means supporting with materials, new items, we can't do in this way. So, we support by cash distribution. So, in some contexts, even if there is no local market, you know, people can buy from one house to another house, you know, they can buy from one camp to another camp, they can buy from their neighbours, so they will manage themselves. But like, this is like cash, in cash support. The project management is conducted in our main office, but the implementation is done by the field staff. And we often invite our field staff to come to our main office if possible, and conduct training for them.

Meghan: It sounds like amid this risk that you and your families and colleagues are in, you've found ways to be clever and creative about how you distribute aid. Can you talk a bit about the impact that you've seen from people who are receiving the materials?

Mr. Khong: The physical impact and the mental impact...continuous you know, it is not one time incidents. It is continuous. So, people are displacing. People are moving sometimes, they are not exactly staying in one place because the conflict is taking place around you know, sometimes the air strike come and people are moving around. So, people are very, you know, they cannot make a stable earning. So, there is no salary anymore, there is no farm anymore, they cannot work on farm, because land mines are risky in the farms. So, they are always worry, they are always borrowing money from one house from another house. And by this support, you know, they can have a very high level of mental release, they can take the time of rest. One point. And the second point is physical need and nutrition. Some families in the very worst situation, they try to have food only one time a day, they try to eat breakfast in the late morning, not to be hungry by noon. In the monitoring process, we interview people, and they say that they never had, you know, rice enough for one week. But because of the support, you know, they can have around one month for rice.

Meghan: Mr. Khong explained that where possible, partners are also distributing food packages that include items like chickpeas that help increase nutrition for recipients. Another benefit he says he's seen is a decrease in domestic violence.

Mr. Khong: In our monitoring, what we can't do is like we can measure you know how to impact reduce their domestic violence. Because we have seen many incidents, even killing you know, between husband and wife in these IDP collective centres. But how much the domestic violence level is reduced cannot be measured. And we don't have baseline either. And we can't measure but I hope this will make very high impact on reducing the domestic violence. And also, you know, child abuse and human trafficking—it will reduce actually. And that's just that

the general symptoms that I can express. But because we can't we are not able to measure these exactly. It's difficult to report to you and inform you.

Meghan: And that connects back to what you were saying earlier. You learned from your peacebuilding training where when people have what they need. It builds peace. So it builds peace within the home. And it also builds peace outside of the home in the country as a whole. You sound hopeful that humanitarian aid is also helping build peace. I'm curious to hear from you like, so you've talked about the risk of distributing these humanitarian materials. And you've said that that's a risk to you. Why do you continue to do this work even though there's such a big risk?

Mr. Khong: First thing is longing of meaning in life. I really, you know, when I work on that I really fulfill, you know, my longing that I cannot express, which is the meaning being meaningful to my country, being meaningful to my community, that that can't be measured. And my Christian commitment to the churches. Starting, initiating this process, it has been around three years until today. Our program's development is very limited, you know, on the other hand, but we are still working and the impact that we can make is growing, for example. Actually, Mennonite Central Committee is the first organization that trust us to work on that with a small grant, you know, but with that proof and trust and confidence, we are growing in also in partnership. So I don't think if I leave this work, the programs will collapse, I don't think in that way. But I'm don't have any clear or command, spiritual command and conviction to leave this work. Even when I compare to the risk, possible risks, and the meaningfulness that I'm working on, I still feel my meaningfulness is getting more heavier than risk. That's why I think, maybe one day when it is too heavy, when the risk become very heavy, maybe. But now, I still feel I can, I will take the risk. When in the Bible Jesus talks about donation. And he said, Do not let your other hand know what your other hand donate, right? But now in our context, maybe it is not biblical interpretation. But it's like, we need to do humanitarian [aid distribution] very secretly, it's very low profile, you know, telling no one. That's a very different interpretation. I learned from one of the pastors in the grassroots community. And one, another point is like, being riskless is not always the will of God. And so, I think sometimes the risk maybe what God prepare for us.

Meghan: It's very moving to hear you talk about that. And I think a lot of people who are listening will relate to that feeling of wanting meaning in their life and to feel like they're doing good work.

I'm curious, you've talked about how you're of waiting to see your name on the conscription to be called to join the military. Do you have a plan for what you would do if that happens? If you're comfortable sharing.

Mr. Khong: Yeah, as soon as I learn that, I will buy my air ticket at the first date. And I will try to move to another block because our country is not very digitalized. It is very difficult for them to trace, even if I moved to another block. But running into, running abroad by flight is also risky because my son don't have passport. So and if it doesn't work, I will try to run to remote area, you know, where we have less internet. Our current humanitarian target area where there is less military, you know, there is no rule of law anymore. But community, like traditional culture maintains social order. And there are churches. So I will run there, that's my plan. And continue the work.

Meghan: You're so committed, I can tell. Well those were all my questions. But did you have anything else that you'd like to add?

Mr. Khong: Yeah, we don't know what will come. And now, the donation from MCC has been a miracle to us. And it also inspire us, you know, sometime we feel like being shameful of asking for help. And thanking people. You know, we really dream of becoming the one who can also serve other people, you know, now we are always the beneficiary and we sometimes feel, you know, our human dignity are not there anymore. But we still believe in God and we thank God that, you know, we have our faith brothers and sisters like MCC you know who are committed to this work. Always MCC is at the frontline. All the beneficiaries, IDPs, they say thank you to MCC. They asked me to convey their thanks. I told them about MCC. And they also really looking forward to someday where MCC community and staff can visit their villages you know. And also it spiritually strengthen us. You know, your support really strengthen us to be more agents of support to where the humanitarian crisis around the world.

Meghan: At MCC, we couldn't do what we're doing without the help of people like you. So it's very much a mutual partnership. And we're so grateful for the courageous work that you and other people are doing. It was a pleasure to meet you and hear your story as well. So thank you.

Mr. Khong: Thank you very much. Yes.

(MUSIC TRANSITION)

Meghan: That was Mr. Khong, though we aren't using his real name for security reasons. He works for one our partners in Myanmar.

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This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation. This episode was hosted and produced by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. We pray for our partners, like Mr Khong, who are on the front lines of dangerous situations. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ. Thank you for listening.

(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)

SHOW NOTES:

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