

Title : Myanmar Earthquake response / Crystal Conklin and Lizar

Description: In this episode, we check in with our partners in Myanmar after the 7.7 magnitude earthquake at the end of March. Join us as we speak with MCC partners on the ground and rep Crystal Conlin. MCC partners share firsthand accounts of the destruction, the immediate relief efforts, and the ongoing challenges faced by the communities. Tune in to hear powerful stories of survival, solidarity, and the unwavering commitment to helping those in need.

Lizar: People panic. People didn't know what to do. Everyone got shock for me after one day, after two day I felt, something is serious. I cannot just reseat anymore to sitting in Yangon and listening something. What happening, worrying. So I took the van and then I went directly to Mandalay. I could not imagine. I saw all those kind of landscape, many big building where collapse cracks, lots of people. There was no one who is going to manage all this kind of situation and people doing it by themselves.

VO: Today on the show we are checking in with our partner in Myanmar after the 7.7 Earthquake that hit at the end of March.

This is Christy Kauffman and you're listening to Relief, Development and Podcast a production of Mennonite Central Committee

*Music intro

At the beginning of the episode you heard part of our conversation with Lizar who works with an MCC partner in Myanmar. She is on the ground and we will hear more of her account of what is happening there later in the episode, but first I talked to MCC's representative for Myanmar, Crystal Conklin. She is co Representative with her husband Charles for MCC programs in Myanmar and Cambodia. We will hear from her about the current disaster of the recent earthquake, but also the context in which that disaster took place.

In February 2021, the military seized power, plunging Myanmar into crisis. The country has been gripped by political instability, leading to widespread violence, mass displacement and destruction of property affecting millions of people. On top of that the military began conscripting young people across the country, and outlawed distributing humanitarian relief. MCC's partners in the region face significant challenges.

But you will hear in a minute how since they have already been responding to this crisis in creative and persistent ways, they are actually well positioned to respond to this earthquake.

Christy

So I'm here with our MCC representative for Myanmar, Crystal Conklin, to hear more about MCC C'S response and role in the recovery from the disaster that happened in Myanmar March 28th when a 7.7 magnitude earthquake hit central Myanmar.

Crystal

Earthquake is devastating. Our partners and current projects are located just outside the central zone of devastation for the earthquake, which puts them in a strong position to help. So they are sending us videos and photos of the devastation. People are mostly living outside of the structures on the streets because so many homes and buildings are destroyed, but even the ones standing, people are very afraid to enter. So most of the streets are lined with people just living outside on the street on tarps or blankets or whatever they can salvage.

Christy

Are there any stories that you've heard that have stood out to you?

Crystal

So it's hot season in Myanmar and then the rains are coming soon. It's right at the end of the hottest season, and the rains will be coming soon and the heat means that the bodies decomposed quickly and with rains coming, that means those bodies that haven't been taken care of are likely to spread disease because the rain will then wash any disease out into the streets and into the ground. So the decomposing bodies is a real risk, and Myanmar needs help to dig out the bodies and they need body bags to safely contain them. They also need clean water, mosquito nets and tarps for shelters. One of the yers that was chosen for next year, so she will be leaving for her assignment in August. She was at a workshop away from a home when the earthquake happened and her mom lives in Mandalay. The home was completely demolished.

Everything inside is crushed for her mom. All of her children are in the age of conscription. The military started doing a conscription law last April, and so many young people have fled the country, including most of her children. So she doesn't have anybody at home with her. So, she's sleeping on the broken concrete outside her house. It's hard to have good sanitation practices. It's hard to prepare rice without clean water or cooking supplies. She has to try and dig out anything she needs and moving concrete with your bare hands. She's afraid of shifting the rubble and making a further collapses happen. So we really think about her and pray for her, and also of course for the yamen who is trying to get back there to help her.

Christy:

Oh, wow. Yeah, and there would be so much fear being in a structure that's maybe not, you're not sure of how it is.

Crystal

Mandale was kind of the seat of a lot of art and culture has been traditionally, historically. So they have had these beautiful old, old buildings that are just gone, all of the architecture from years past, which is really hard emotionally as well. Right. It's hard to lose your home, but then it's also hard to lose pieces of your culture. Very ancient historic buildings that are now rubble.

Christy

Yeah, you're losing history with that. I want to take a step back from the earthquake and you mentioned about conscription. Can you tell me a little bit more about the context of Myanmar before the earthquake and what MCC program was working on?

Crystal

Sure. So MCC has been working in Myanmar for many years, a little bit inside and outside of my 2 f008. MCC had a very strong response and Myanmar was willing to let people in, but international NGOs to do aid. So a lot of our biggest programming and longest standing partnerships come from that time period. And we have been doing peace programming and we had a livelihoods project as well for many years. But when the coup happened in 2021, the military came in and took over, arrested everybody in the civilian government. A lot of, even like our peace partners said, train us on humanitarian work. We don't know how to do that, but everybody needs something. There are so many people that are displaced now. People are being, I mean in Mondelez there's an airstrip that every night they could hear the planes take off to go out and bomb different areas of the country, areas that are being more closely bombed or are closer to the hot zones for fighting. People often will just leave those areas and they'll live in the jungle.

Christy

Wow. That's a wild reality to think about. And that's before there's an earthquake on top of that.

Crystal

Yeah.

Christy

I understand. There's also relief work prior to the earthquake as well and distributions prior to the earthquake because of the military seizing power in 2021. What are some of the challenges with distributing aid in recent years, even before the earthquake?

Crystal

So the military has said any aid that goes to certain communities is illegal, and so anybody found distributing aid is to arrest and certainly all the goods would be seized. One of our partner staff, he was using a variety of kind of fake names to order all the food for the MCC projects, and he heard through the grapevine that one of his fake names had made the list, and so then he had to relocate. He left home. He lives in a different city, a different part of the country, and he is not able to be as directly involved anymore. Just getting food through and around is really, really hard. The roads aren't great and there are stop and seizure points anywhere, but those are inconsistent and it's not only the military that will take food shipments. Also other people, the ethnic armed groups might take the food shipments.

So we try as much as possible to buy food as close to the internally displaced person's camp that we're supporting so that it has to go through the least amount of checkpoints. But sometimes they'll have to find out, oh, this road isn't going to work today. So then they'll find a boat and send it kind of down the river around the back to try to get the food there. So those are the biggest risks is just the physical moving of the food. Carrying large sums of money is also highly suspect and people are subject to arrest and interrogation. Interrogation is always torture and very few people are released from interrogation if they're taken. So it's really risky work. When we first started talking with them, especially one of the partners had some experience in it and they were ready to do it. The other partners when we were training them on This is how you do humanitarian work, this is how you make sure we don't just give rice, which is kind of the default.

Everybody in Asia anyway is like, just give us rice. But we talk about, no, we need a balanced nutrition. We need to make sure they have access to water to cook the rice. We need to make sure that there's a protein involved and that there's some salt and some oil and there's a more nutritious package because we don't want to prolong suffering if we just give rice and then end up with so many malnourished

people. It creates long-term problems. We kind of talked to them, we were like, this is a high risk thing. Are you guys, how are you feeling about that? We don't want to push you. And they said to us, they said, we are going to do this. We have to help these people. We know them and we love them. We will take the food from our homes and we will take it to them even though there's risk. If MCC wants to help us with this, we welcome it, but we're not going to stop going just because there's risk. We're going to do whatever we can because we know 'em and we care about 'em. So it's challenging situation, but our partners are really, really committed and really resilient. So I really appreciate their approach and their commitment to this.

Christy

That sounds like dangerous work. Are the checkpoints still around now as well, even with maybe people trying to get more aid with the earthquake?

Crystal

For sure. Yeah. The military checkpoints don't tend to move quite as much as the ethnic armed groups might just kind of raid an area. But the military would very much like to control how all aid is distributed and they would very much like to ensure aid only goes to communities that have been supportive of the military, which leaves out quite a lot of people. And so our partners are trying to stay connected with the marginalized people to make sure that that aid gets through to everybody that needs it As much as possible.

Christy

How much do you know about how MCC will be responding? What can you tell us about that do the earthquake itself?

Crystal

Yeah, so humanitarian aid, we've been kind of preparing for this in some ways by everybody getting trained. The peace work is still going to continue. We have some really excellent peace projects, but because the peace partners and the churches asked for training years ago in how to do humanitarian aid, they're actually really well equipped. And one of the partners then went on to train a larger group of nonprofits on how to do humanitarian work, the MCC way, which is really neat. Again, making sure things are balanced nutritionally, making sure that you're giving equally within the village or the community or the internally displaced persons camp. But the first things we're looking at really are food, water, and medical supplies. That's going to be our first wave of response. And then after we get that immediate response out, we'll be talking with people about what they need as far as shelters, as far as relocating, one of the hardest things about the areas that we're hit is they are kind of homed to some of the biggest populations of internally displaced people. So people from around Myanmar have been chased out of their homes through violence, and they move to these areas that has now been hit by the earthquake. So the traumas are compounding, and first we'll take care of the body as much as possible, and then we will also try to care for people's psychological and emotional wellbeing.

Christy

Yeah. You mentioned about the peace projects Can you tell us a little bit about what are the peace projects that are ongoing there?

Crystal

Sure. So one of our partners has focused on doing peace programming that teaches not necessarily theoretical peace, but kind of interpersonal peace building as well as understanding how to do trauma healing. That's been very challenging as conflict has increased and people are bringing their traumas to their settings. So young people lost schooling, everything shut down, and then they saw the military attacking their peers and their community. So they're seeing all these things happen and our partners are watching them go from nice young people to violent young people because nothing else for them to do. And so they've done training first in humanitarian aid, here's how you can respond. Here's a positive way to put your energy and frustration. Here's something you can do. But then also understanding your own trauma and what is trauma and what does it look like.

In one of the churches, the pastors we're advising people to pray and read their bibles, and we need to have an understanding of how trauma is affecting us and how we can care for each other in a more complex way. So one of those ways is just kind of by teaching. They were having one of their sessions and the pastors kept talking about why does the military do this? Why? And our partner kind of helped them to reframe it to thinking about what happened to them that they are doing this and changing that question to be a more trauma-informed question, not only allowed it to start humanizing the perpetrators, but it makes them less this giant monolithic force of nature that nothing can change, like an earthquake to the military is not an earthquake. It is a disaster, but it's full of people and people are complex and our motivations are complex.

So that training continues, and then they're also training nonprofit leaders on peaceful approaches, and it's kind of a three year course. So the leaders then take what they've learned about conflict transformation, about trauma healing and trauma-informed approaches into their work as churches, as schools and healthcare, whatever their sector is. They're adding a level of how to be more intentional about having the experience be more healing for people because violence happens in big and little ways. And so we need healing to happen in big and little ways. And a lot of times those small interactions help to pave that way for people.

Christy

You mentioned churches a few times and I was curious about the church's role in the response in distributions in the past or how you expect them to be a part of the future responses.

Crystal

Myanmar is a country with a lot of, we call them insider outsider dynamics. And what I mean by that is there's a constant kind of push towards identifying who's in your group and who's out, who do you belong to and who belongs to you, and that's what dictates who you help. And the churches are very cool. They are responding in the opposite way. They're reaching out to all people to Buddhists, to Muslims, to other Christian sects and denominations as well as across ethnic groups too. And that is such a testimony to God's work, right? We want to show love to all people, and love isn't just having nice words. Love is sharing the very little bit of rice I have or making sure that your family also has access to this first aid kit. So the churches are having a much more inclusive response rather than just taking care of their own, which is a radical approach in Myanmar .

Christy

How are partners responding to immediate needs now?

Crystal

So they were, and Lisa can speak a little bit more about that. She was there, she was doing a water distribution and they had a box of food. I'm not entirely sure everything that was in that box of food that they had multiple boxes they were handing out at the distribution center, so it was water and food this week.

Christy

What would you want others to pray for? The people of Myanmar?

Crystal

Big picture. I always ask for people to pray for the miracle of resurrection in Myanmar. So just as Jesus went through death and pain and came out with new life, that is also my prayer for Myanmar. They've gone through a time of great struggle and a lot of pain and a lot of death. And so I pray for a resurrection time for them where there's going to be new life and peace. I also always ask for prayer for the safety, the physical safety and the psychological wellbeing of the partners doing the work. They feel very forgotten a lot of the time with so many things happening in the world and with very little ability to move things on a un level.

We were able to visit them this year, which was so encouraging, so exciting, really good to be together. And now with the earthquake, the military has closed tourist visas again, so I'm not sure when we'll be able to see them next. I believe fully in the power of prayer in that it works. We had one partner who he was supposed to go to the market and he was on the phone with somebody and they just wouldn't stop. And he was very frustrated, but he was like, you know what? I need to do this. I need to take care of it. He didn't make it to the market and a bomb went off at that market at the time he was supposed to be there. And I believe it's the prayer that has been protecting them so far. And so I always ask for prayer for each of them and their families. And then also prayer that people will be able to make groups within their communities that can take care of each other. There's been a lot of breakdown of trust. And so even if we're stopped tomorrow, rebuilding civil society is going to take a lot of time. And so a lot of our projects are focused on that. Even within the humanitarian aid, we're trying to help people to help each other and trust each other. And so rebuilding those kind of bonds of civil society. So those are my three prayer

Christy

Requests. Thank you.

Crystal

I just really appreciate people being supportive and people continuing to remember Myanmar and care for them. I know it's hard for us to tell stories sometimes because of the security situation and there is a lot of digital insecurity in Myanmar. We can't always tell stories, but when we can, we really appreciate The support of the community.

*ring

Lizar

Hello?

Christy

Hello

Hi. Hi. Are we finally connected?

Christy VO:

After talking to crystal I called Lisa, she works with an MCC partner in Myanmar. The connection with her was a bit unstable, so you'll hear that in the audio from time to time.

Lizar

Okay, yes, Christy. My name is Van Lizar and I am director NGO. In 2008 we met with MCC. We worked together to respond disaster cyclone in Yangon region and Delta. So after that I became a partners of MCC. So we have been working together with MCC for more than almost 15 years, I think. Yes.

Christy

Wow. A long,

Lizar

So right now, yeah, very long relationship,

Christy

Yes. I want to ask you a bit about the earthquake. Where were you when it happened?

Lizar

On 28th March? I was talking with my friends and just very normal days, my body was shaking and then I feel, oh, I feel disease and then maybe I feel sick, so I just need to see. And then I sit. But still my body was shaking. I feel like what happened. And then when I look up on the ceiling, things are moving around, so I feel like I shock, oh, it is up quick. Something happened. So it was very, in my life, I never experienced that kind of situation. So later, after a minute, two minutes, many people, my neighbors, everyone was outside of the house. We just talk about it was earthquake, it was serious electricity, phone line, internet line. It stopped. And after one and two hours, I feel like it is very strong earthquake. But unfortunately we only see the news from Thailand, not from Myanmar because we don't know each other. What happened here because the internet, electricity, everything was cut out.

Christy

So the reporting from the earthquake you were seeing was all from Thailand?

Lizar

Yes, Thailand. That very tall building was collapsed, right?

Christy

What are people doing in those areas? Are people living in their homes or are they outside?

Lizar

Yeah, because of as after military coup, like military never announced on those kind of emergency situation. So even themselves, even themselves, they don't know. So I met a major general or some senior

people in ndo. They thought it's not adequate. First time they thought it was bone strike by someone, so this is what they got shocked. So it means that we did not have news, we did not have news, And even some people, they don't have awareness to run out from the building

Lizar

That they just hiding somewhere in the house, inside the house. So people panic also. People panic. People didn't know what to do. Everyone got shock for me after one day, after two day I fell, something is serious. I cannot just receipt anymore to sitting in Yangon and listening something. What happening, worrying. So I took the van and then I went directly to Mandalay. I could not imagine. I saw all those kind of landscape, many big building where collab cracks, lots of people. There was no one who is going to manage all this kind of situation and people doing it by themselves. Some local group, local volunteer group, they helping each other. So that's only, and then some place there was no water, no toilet. People there send a place to sleep. It's mess up very much The damage was serious.

Christy

Yeah, I understand you were on the site doing water and food distributions, is that right? Yes,

Lizar

Yes, yes. So immediately we saw the situation and we brought all those kind of egg products as much as we can and then we distribute where it needs. Yes.

Christy

What food were you distributing

Lizar

At the time? Water. Drinking water. So we need to distribute drinking water and food because people, they don't can't cook. No, they can't cook. So we need to cook instant food. Now we cook, we distribute instant food, rice and meals and like that because of dehydration, electrolyte powders that they can mix with water. So we distribute all those kind of thing. And we also distribute snack, snack bread, those kind of instant food sharing everyone they can eat immediately. People sleep outside because of they lost their house. And many people, even though their house is not a crack or something happened, but they don't want to sleep in their house anymore because they scared this kind of thing will happen again. So everyone slept outside on the road so they don't have proper how to ate on the ground. So we bought some mats and we bought a mosquito nurse those area very hot and then very humid sometimes and lots of mosquito everywhere. In the afternoon it was very hot. So we provide some kind of taping to make temporary shelter sheltering to do the tent on the roof like this.

So I went with the building and some building was so smelly, I said, why? It is so smell some bodies still inside the building. So this is the situation. There are still many dead bodies or laws, Unfound bodies.

Christy

You talked about the water and the food. And I'm curious, what other health concerns do people have? Not having access to things.

Lizar

Yeah, health concern is serious. There are many injured people injured and so all this international come through. Military is not trust by people. And then because of CDM movement, after coup civil, dis obedient movement, there are many, many how to call medical public service is not working anymore in our countries. In this situation, that affects seriously, yes, some area they don't get any supporting because military also not allowed to go and usually also not allowed to go. Those area, the people, they don't get any supporting. So we need to collect those kind of information also. So there are very complex situation happening because of this political situation.

Christy

And when you were distributing water and food, what are the people in those communities telling you about their experience, about their needs, about life right now?

Lizar

Yeah, they said the needs are varies from to call one place to one place, one place. My said we need to call roof, we need temporary shelter. They might say one area, some areas said, oh, we need water only. For example, some people area might say, oh, we don't need water anymore and we have lots of donation. Some area might say we never get any supporting. So the situation, situation is very from based on the area. So for example, the transportation, if here is transportation is better, the news are very much trending on the social media. Those people will get supporting very easy to receive, supporting first time area. The transportation is not very good and there is no internet line, no medias no information. They might be excluded from the age. So this is how I heard from people. So that's why some people are very nice or we don't need this support anymore, we get some, so why not you share this to other people where they know. Since the coop many you are also not allowed and working in Yangon and Myanmar anymore, they don't give to register or many restriction happen. So mainly who work in the local level in this situation. So the capacity is like that, But local people are very strong. They know. So that's why women first mobilize local people.

Christy

What are you planning for your response? You've done some initial distributions, but what are you hoping to do to help the community in the future? In the coming weeks and months,

Lizar

We really need to do, because of how to call psychosocial support, Let's say people got traumatized. Not only this quake, they have been struggling for four years now. So mental health will cause a loss. So we need to work for that and also to do that kind of mental health. So after one month, two months, and also at the same time now we set up the team in Mandalay

And we start to survey because it is important the damage and loss and the situation happening is very big, massive.

Christy

If you had a message for other parts of the world right now about your community, what would you want them to know?

Lizar

Commented [ELI]: I would take this out

Yeah, we want international community give supporting, even though difficult, we will find a way to support the community as much as we can supporting keep helping us and we will work with people. So I want the international community, don't forget to Myanmar it. The rehabilitation is very huge, very big. Even the military said they're hopeless. They know that they don't have capacity to redo rehabilitation. For all this damage. It means consequences. People have to reestablish by themselves. We were not able to do everything, but we do what we can and we help where we can. This is what we realized. That's why immediately we respond immediately.

Christy

It definitely sounds like you're a mobilizer of people and communities in a time of need.

Lizar

Yes, yes. Yeah. After this situation happened, I mobilized everyone, come back. Now some people already settle in mentally they start collect the data because they know themselves. This is important. And then we continue working already with the supporting of MCC also in this.

Christy

I'm glad that MCC is able to help you guys continue this work.

Lizar

We definitely believe and trust. So we continue working already.

Christy

Yeah. Yeah. Well, I will let you get back to your important work, but I want to thank you so much for speaking with me today and telling me about everything that's happening on the ground.

Lizar

Thank you so much.

*transition

Christy VO

MCC partners are positioned well to respond to the earthquake both because of location and recent trainings and knowledge that they have prepared.

Myanmar is not an easy context to do this work, we ask your prayers of safety for our partners on the ground and your support to continue this work, past the initial distributions. Our partners will continue walking with communities to recover over the course of time.

MCC is collecting donations for this disaster response, as you could hear from Lisa, there is distributions for immediate needs that are happening now and a plan to continue into trauma support in the future. If you would like to contribute to this work, there is a link in the show notes.

This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was produced on the traditional land of the Algonquin, Lenape, Nanticoke, Piscataway, Shawnee and Susquehannock people groups. It was recorded and produced by me, Christy Kauffman, and the head producer is Emily Loewen.

A lot is happening in the world right now. We pray for our partners, like Lisa, 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.

Thanks and take good care.

*Music outro