

# **B U R M A (M Y A N M A R)**

## **SECTION A**

### **Capital**

Rangoon (although the regime refers to the capital as Yangon) 2,513,023 (1983 est.)

### **Area**

676,552 sq km (261,218 sq mi)

### **Form of government**

Military Regime

### **GDP—per capita**

Purchasing power parity—\$1,200 (1999 est.)

### **Population**

41,734,853 (July 2000 est.)

### **Ethnic composition**

Burman	68%
Shan	9%
Karen	7%
Rakhine	4%
Chinese	3%
Mon	2%
Indian	2%
Other	5%

**Official language**

Burmese

**Other languages**

Karen, Chin, Shan, various Kachin dialects, Mon and English

**Legislation dealing with the use of languages**

The country is without constitutional provisions related to linguistic rights.

*The Constitution*, originally adopted on September 24, 1947, was subrogated by a new Constitution drafted on January 3, 1974, has been suspended since September 18, 1988. A national convention convened on January 9, 1993 to draft a new Constitution; chapter headings and three of fifteen sections have been approved.

**Background notes**

Myanmar is the fifth most populated country in Southeast Asia with 135 different ethnic minorities. Each of them belongs to one of the three major racial groups: the Monkhmers, the Tibeton Bamars and the Thai-Shans. Some of the ethnic minorities are still fighting for a sovereign state (Kachin, Karen).

More than 100 indigenous languages are spoken in Myanmar, but the most common and the official language is Burmese. During the British colonial period (1820's-1948), when the country's official name was Burma, English became the official language; however, after independence, it lost its previous status.

Burma had experienced a long history of migration and conflicts among various ethnic groups, which were somewhat resolved during British rule and a diverse people were brought under at least nominal central administration. During World War II, while many Burman joined Japanese forces, many minority ethnic groups remained loyal to Britain. This reflected a genuine desire for independence from both groups. The Burmans were struggling to be free from the British and ethnic minorities wished to escape Burman domination.

The Union of Burma became independent in 1948, when General Aung San convinced ethnic groups to join a new union. The promises were never fulfilled and almost immediately after independence Burma was plunged into a series of brutal ethnic wars that have continued with varying intensity to this day.

## **SECTION B**

### **Where does one observe language to be a problem in the country?**

Ethnic minorities make up about a third of Myanmar's population and live mainly in the mountainous regions bordering Bangladesh, China, India, Laos and Thailand. They have suffered persistent and gross human rights violations perpetrated by the Burmese army (the Tatmadaw) during its attempts to unify the multi-ethnic country by force.

Many thousands of people have been targeted simply because of their ethnic origin. The Rohingyas, Burmese Muslims who live in the northern state of Rakhine (Arakan), are not acknowledged as Burmese by the government, which has said on several occasions that there are "135 national races" in Myanmar and "this does not include the Rohingyas". Under the provisions of the 1982 Citizenship Law most Rohingyas are denied full citizenship. The law provides for three types of citizens depending on how many generations have lived in Myanmar. As a result, the Rohingyas do not enjoy many basic rights, such as freedom of movement within the country.

Waves of refugees poured out of the country in two directions: eastwards, Karen, Mon, (110,000) Shan, Akha to Thailand and westwards, the Rohingya (250,000) to Bangladesh and the Chin to India.

### **The use of language in everyday life e.g. education, broadcasting and other**

According to linguists, Burmese is the official language of Myanmar, although government officials often call it the Myanmar language. It is spoken by a majority of the population, including non-indigenous ethnic minorities. About 15% of the population speaks Shan and Karen. English is spoken among the educated, and the country contains a sizable number of Chinese speakers.

Education is free and compulsory for children 5 to 10 years of age. Secondary education consists of four years at middle or vocational school and additional two years at high school. Middle and vocational schools are free and high schools are not. Secondary schools enroll 35% of the secondary school-age population. Instruction in primary and secondary schools are in the Burmese language. English is the second language taught in many secondary schools.

Radio Myanmar (RM) broadcasts in Myanmar (Burmese), English and eight national languages.

## Conclusion

One third of Myanmar's population belongs to a wide variety of ethnic minority groups. Surprisingly, in such complicated surroundings the language issue is not a source of ethnic tension. Ethnic mixture and the military regime have caused mass emigration and violation of human rights of the members of ethnic minorities trying to preserve their homes and culture.

## APPENDIX A

### MAP OF BURMA



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