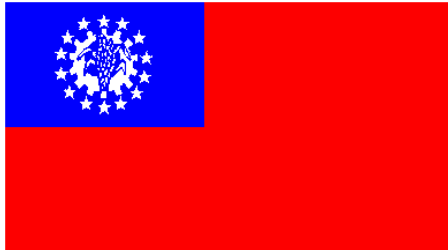


FACT SHEET – BURMA (Myanmar)

BACKGROUND



The name of the country of Burma (or Myanmar, as it is officially known by the Myanmar government) is associated with the dominant ethnic group, the Burmese or sometimes Burmans. The name Myanmar was initiated by a military government in 1988. The current regime is viewed, by many countries, to have a poor human rights record, and hence the use of the name

Myanmar is not always used.

It is bordered by China, Thailand, India, Laos and Bangladesh. The ethnic Burmese, called Karen, started to flee to the Mae La refugee camp on the border of Burma in 1984 to escape political unrest and persecution. Mae La has grown to be the largest of the nine refugee camps in the region. More than 9000 people from the camp have been resettled since then and a further 10,000 are expected by the end 2008. The Burmese will continue to be one of the largest groups of entrants under Australia's humanitarian program for 2008-09.

CULTURAL MAKEUP and LANGUAGE

There are 135 ethnic groups in Burma with a majority of 68% being Burmans. Their languages and cultures are as distinct as their origins however 80% speak Burmese. Each of the ethnic groups also has their own language and their own dialect and so they may speak Burmese as a second language. It is estimated that 80% therefore speak Burmese, either as a first or as a second language.

RELIGION

It is estimated that nearly 90% of Burmese are Theravada Buddhist with the rest being either Christian or Muslim.

BURMESE NAMING PRACTICES

Unlike many societies, a Burmese woman does not change her name after marriage. Children are usually named by the day of the week he/she was born. People are addressed according to their age. Older people's names are preceded with 'U' (pronounced 'oo') and Daw; the equivalents of Mr and Ms respectively. Young male adults are addressed as Ko and young female adults as Ma. Children are referred to as Maung and Ma for males and females respectively. Burmese names are not divided as first and last names but referred to as a whole and in some instances they may only have one name.

VALUES

Respect for elders is important in Burmese culture. Younger persons never sit at a level higher than that of an elder in the same room, nor do they sit with their feet pointing at elders. Both of these practices are considered impolite. Children of both sexes are loved equally. The chief reason families would want a son is to have a novitiation ceremony (an acceptance as a monk) which is believed to bring great merit to the parents.

TRADITIONS

MARRIAGE AND FAMILY: Arranged marriages are still common in Burma. Respect between genders and between generations is paramount. The family unit is a broader concept than western notions of family. Cousins are regarded as brothers and sisters.

FIRST DAY OF SCHOOLYEAR: It is customary for Burmese children to bring a coconut or another piece of fruit on the first day of school. This is similar to the notion of bringing an apple for the teacher that has its origins in the practice of bringing something affordable and healthy.

FESTIVALS

Burma has several festivals for every month of the year. They are of both cultural and religious significance. Here are just a few of them:

THE WATER FESTIVAL (Thingyan) falls in April and is celebrated for three days to mark the Burmese New Year. This festival is celebrated with singing and dancing and a great deal of water throwing. It is believed that being saturated in water cleanses one's sins and washes away bad luck.

THE KASONE FESTIVAL usually falls on the full moon in May. It is the day of Buddha's birth, his enlightenment and his death. The Bodhi tree, a kind of fig tree, under which Buddha meditated, is watered on this day.

CUISINE AND EATING HABITS

Burmese traditionally eat using their right hand. A typical meal would include rice as the staple, with salted or curried fish, meat or vegetables. Respect for elders is continued in eating habits where the eldest diners are served first. Even if the elders are absent, the first piece of rice is scooped and set aside as an act of respect for one's parents. This custom is called *oo cha*, meaning first serve. Chopsticks and a Chinese style spoon are used for noodle dishes. The use of knives and forks is rare as the preference for utensils is most often a spoon and fork.

CULTURAL DOS AND DON'TS:

- When addressing people, don't leave out 'u' (which stands for Mr) or 'daw' (which stands for Ms/Mrs).
- Do not touch any adult on the head. This is seen as insulting.
- Do not step over any part of a person, as it is considered rude.
- Accept or give things with your right hand.
- In Burma, unlike the Indian continent, nodding means 'yes', and shaking head means 'no'.

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