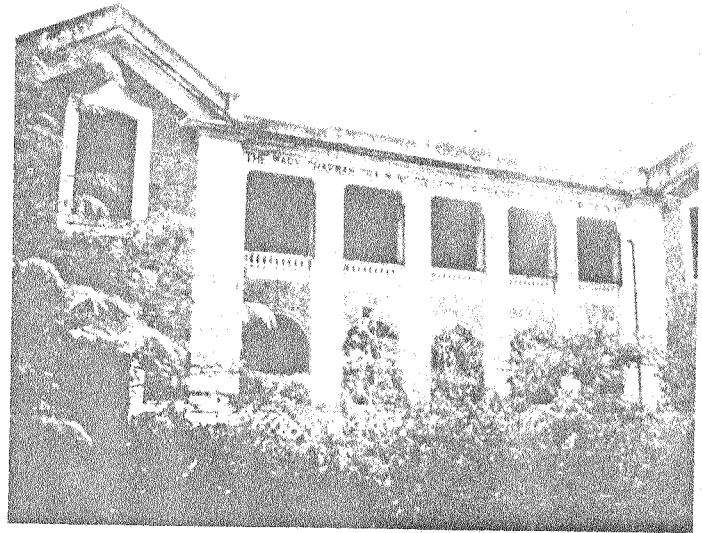


# Burma - - The Challenge Of Adversity

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Left: Burma's only school for the deaf, the Mary Chapman Training College and School for the Deaf, is housed in this remnant of British Colonial rule. Right: Even with minimal government support, the school manages to house and educate about 50 deaf children (with the help of Church donations). This new "annex" was built in the latter days of British rule.

One of the hardest things for those of us from the Philippines to get used to when traveling abroad is the "hospitality" we find in other countries. We pride ourselves on our "Filipino hospitality," which, we believe, has no equal anywhere else in the world! It was for this reason that I found myself very much at home in Burma. The hospitality, friendliness and warmth of the Burmese people can't be matched anywhere in the world (except, of course, in the Philippines!).

It makes it even more tragic, then, to see a people as deserving as the Burmese in the grips of such dire poverty. Indeed, in all of my travels around the world, I would be hard pressed to name another country I've visited as so absolutely poor as Burma. It's probably hard for DEAF AMERICAN readers to imagine a country without even a single television set (because there is no TV station in Burma!). Even in Rangoon, one of the few areas of the country, to have electricity, light bulbs flicker and dim, barely able to break the night's darkness with thin yellowing beams.

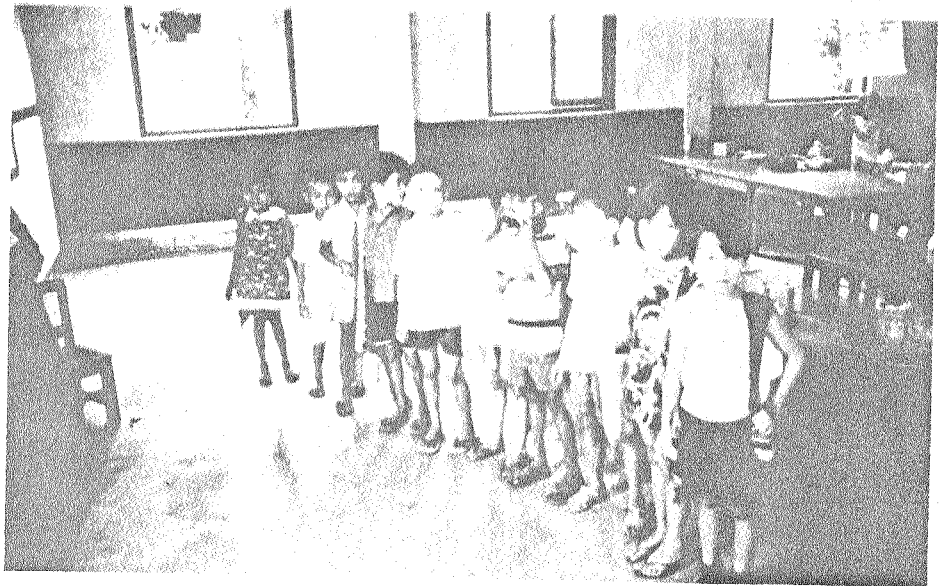
Rangoon's international airport (a remnant of British colonial days), one of the first things to greet the arriving visitor, after lengthy and protracted immigration and customs inspections, is a first encounter with the "black market." Though the legal rate of exchange for Burmese currency is about six Kyat to the dollar, the black market will pay about twenty to the dollar! And then turn the unwary tourist in to customs police who confiscate the illegally ex-

changed currency (It's best to go by the book in Burma!).

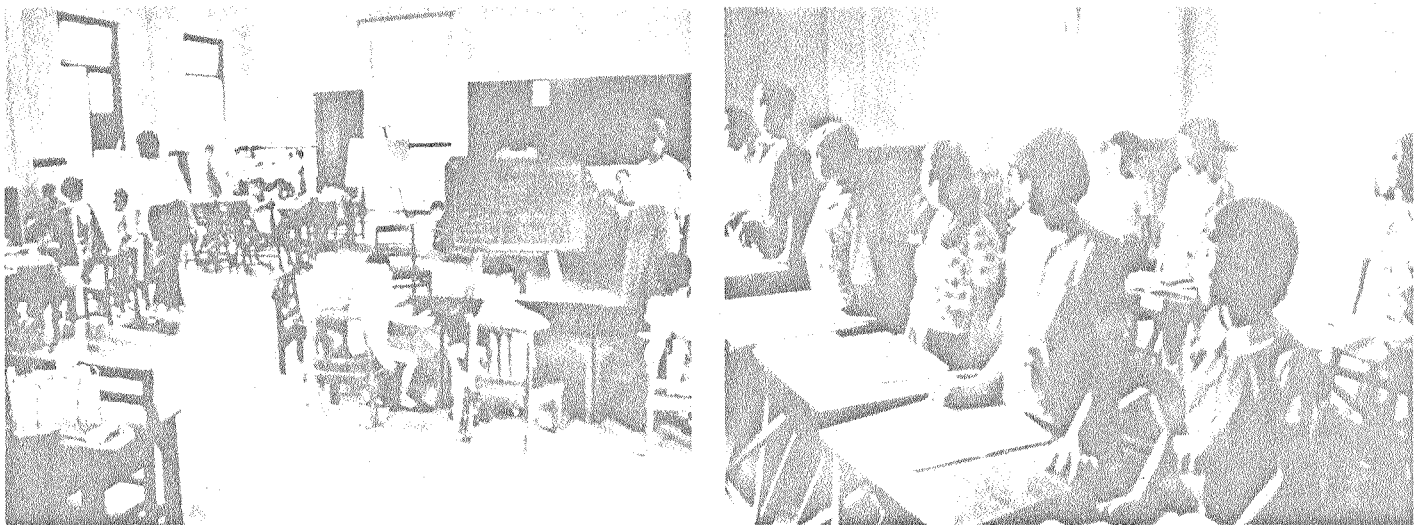
My first battle came with the shuttle bus driver. The bus is supposed to provide service between the airport and the Union of Burma Airways office in downtown Rangoon. According to our tourist information the bus was supposed to be free—according to the driver it cost the equivalent of \$1. Since no tickets were issued I refused to pay—and the driver refused to budge! I finally agreed to pay only *after* we reached

our destination, and we were under-way. It was "rush hour" as we drove through Rangoon and environs—"rush hour" means about one vehicle spotted every five minutes. Since there are no "private" cars in Burma, most autos are ferrying government officials or embassy staff. Trucks and buses form the remainder of Burma's traffic.

One quickly makes friends (and "friends") in Rangoon. As soon as I was in my YMCA room (another remnant of British colonial days), "friends" invited



Toddlers of all ages come all over Burma, but primarily from the Rangoon area. Boarding facilities are provided for the students.



Left: most classes are held in this one large room. Though the school is "oral," current economic conditions in Burma preclude the purchase of any electronic equipment. Right: This group of older children learn their reading and writing in Burmese. Since the days of independence, Burmese has been the authorized medium of instruction in the schools. Prior to that time English was the medium of instruction.

themselves in to review my personal belongings—after a brief chat in Burmese, they offered to purchase various items of clothing, my ball point pen, note pads, etc. I soon learned that what we, even in a poor country like the Philippines, take for granted (such items as ball point pens and notepaper), are luxuries in Rangoon.

Strolling through downtown Rangoon, I saw where all of these "goodies" find their way—the black market. In fact, the black market is the only thriving market in Rangoon. The government-controlled markets can't meet the needs of the people—hence they permit the black market to operate openly (across the street, in fact, from a government market!). As one Burmese friend explained to me, the people were prevented from engaging in any kind of "capitalist" activity, and since the government could not fill in the vacuum left by private enterprise, unemployment rose (to about 50%) and the black markets flourish. My friend went on to explain that after independence from Britain, the government turned to Marxist socialism. As one government leader had put it, "Socialism in Burma may be a Marxist egg, but it is definitely a Burmese egg"; my friend said that local Burmese call it a "scrambled egg." As one strolls through the deserted buildings of what was once a mini-London, he passes the barbed wire encircled presidential palace (there had been riots a few days before my arrival). You can't help but to be grateful for living in a democracy—a trip to Burma is a very sobering experience.

The reader can well imagine what the plight of the deaf must be in a country of such adversity. Actually, the situation is considerably better than in neighboring countries (such as Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, where there are not even any government schools for the deaf—and only an isolated private class or two). Again, this is thanks to a remnant of British colonial days.

During British rule, an English woman, Mary Chapman, began a school for the deaf, eventually the Mary Chapman Training College for Teachers and School for the Deaf. The school is still housed in an ancient British building, still operates under one of its first teachers, Daw Mya Yi, the head mistress, and is still pure oral! As one talks to this little Burmese woman you can't help but to be impressed with her quiet determination and her strength of spirit. In her impeccable Oxford English she tells of the past glories of her school, the hopes she had—and has—and how they still manage to train some teachers for the deaf, of the problems of transporting deaf children to the school—or of boarding them in the school. I spoke to Mrs. Yi of total communication, but somehow my heart was not in it, for in the face of such adversity, methodology, educational philosophy, whatever, just didn't seem important. What became dominant was the light which shone from the faces of Mrs. Yi, her pupils and their teachers, a light of hope. That challenge of such adversity could not destroy their spirit—the hope for a better tomorrow. That's the lesson I learned in Burma.

**Author's Note:** I would hope that DEAF AMERICAN readers would share their generosity with the deaf children of Burma—not by sending money, but by sharing books or school materials which they no longer need. Readers may write directly to:

Daw Mya Yi, Principal  
 Mary Chapman Training College  
 and School for the Deaf  
 2 Tank Road  
 Rangoon, BURMA