



No. 1, Thit-ta-bway Quarter
Yenangyaung
Magway Division
Myanmar



LEI THAR GONE
Guest House

Guest House +95 (0)60 88 21620
Mobile +95 (0)9 505 3342
ept.pet@gmail.com
www.leithargone-guesthouse.com

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Dear friends,

My heartfelt desire for this 1st report of 2024 would be to tell you that the crisis in Myanmar is over, that law and order have been restored and that the country is taking its first tentative steps towards democracy.... Unfortunately, this is just wishful thinking. And the facts tell an entirely different story. On 2 February headlines in «The Irrawaddy» announced:

“By Almost Every Measure, Myanmar Junta Ranks Among World’s Worst Regimes”

The article goes on to say: «since the 1 February 2021 military coup in Myanmar, at least 4,474 civilians have been killed, more than 25,000 people have been arrested and over 78,000 civilian houses have been burned down across the country as a result of the military junta’s nationwide campaign of terror against the population.» The article recounts «the country’s three-year descent into chaos under the military regime.»

Link to full article: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/by-almost-every-measure-myanmar-junta-ranks-among-worlds-worst-regimes.html>

On 10 February, three years after the coup and when it seemed things couldn’t get any worse, Myanmar’s junta activated a national conscription law, ordering all young men and women to serve in the armed forces for at least two years. The military has been seriously depleted by casualties in fighting against resistance forces so the 14 million young people that become available to them because of this law, are welcome recruits.

Fear has gripped the population as conscription «Snatch Squads» seize draft-age people off the streets. As a result, thousands of young people have fled the country or joined the resistance forces, rather than fight with the hated Tatmadaw.

Just this week, Lyon told me that in Yenangyaung 40 young men have already been forcefully taken, without even a chance of informing their parents. The conscription law also negatively affects Light of Love. Because of the law, teacher trainees have been recalled by the «Pinya Sanye Institute of Education» (teacher training school) as the Institute can not guarantee their safety. The trainees have all returned to their home towns.

Not only have trainees left, but for the same reason PSIE cannot send any new trainees to Yenangyaung for the school year beginning June 3rd. This loss of qualified teachers is a frustrating setback for Zoe who has to plan the academic year and draw up all the timetables.

In spite of these dire situations, life in the «land of daily toil» as Eric always called his country, somehow goes on. It is amazing to witness Zoe and Lyon’s «giving up is not an option» mindset and to observe their resilience. Having experienced two decades of repression before 2010, they both recently told me «we are used to this.» when I commiserated with them about the current situation. I truly admire them for their courage and thank them for their perseverance despite the hugely challenging obstacles of daily life!

After all this depressing information, it's time to update you about some encouraging developments at Light of Love. These events and changes are a source of joy and point to a hopeful future!

A major positive factor is the huge impact that Zoe has had on Light of Love since her return last November. Teachers report that students enjoy the new approaches to teaching and are happy in class. The P.S.I.E. trained teachers confirm that there are vast improvements in every respect: every area has changed and the difference between Light of Love with Zoe is enormous. Students respect Zoe and acknowledge her as Eric's successor. Her presence has reduced the misbehaviour level within a few months. Thank you, Zoe, for your ceaseless and selfless investment in the future's of so many children.

Summer camp

From 22 February to 23 March, 80 students from grades 3 – 11 took part in this year's summer camp, lunch and transportation included! Zoe and the P.S.I.E. teachers prepared a month's long special teaching program for the students, including Art, Physical Education, Math, English and Burmese. The students especially enjoyed the games and sports. The local teachers were all present during the teaching sessions. It was their assignment to attend the lessons and observe the approach and teaching style of the P.S.I.E. trained teachers.

The motto of the camp was "we are unity" and the main objective was to learn the meaning of unity. The song "We are unity" by Joelle was the theme song of the camp.

Two sample lines of the text illustrate this desire for unity:

"If we help each other, I just know we can succeed. We are one but we are different" and "Oh, I believe in destiny, it's up to me to make it into reality; give me your hand we'll find the way."

Every class practiced singing the song. On the last day of the camp there was a competition: which class could sing the song the most beautifully? (the combined Grade 10 + 11 class won) The camp also offered time for self-reflexion and many of the students realized that their attitude towards learning and self-control needed to improve. They also realized how privileged they are to be attending Light of Love and to not take this for granted.

The camp meant a lot of effort for the teachers, but it was a rewarding experience for everybody!



Painting the worn wooden blocks from kindergarten was fun



Sports and games were fun too!



The four P.S.I.E. teachers:

Zoe, Hnin Htet Htet Naing (AKA Rihanna), Noe Zin Hmwe, Shwe Yamon Phoo

Teacher Training Workshop

Zoe's aim is to better train the local teachers and for this she and her friend Nant Wai Zar Lwin (Helen) who is a teacher at P.S.I.E. and just returned from the US after a special 12-week training program, organized the first ever TOT (training of teachers) workshop at Light of Love. The main objective of the workshop was to introduce a new assessment system at Light of Love. Until now, the grades given depended entirely on the exam results. (This is the "normal" system, used throughout Myanmar) But the assessment of performance in class is absolutely necessary as the exam results have no real-life usage. Often, because of the current evaluation system, the children don't study. If they fail – no problem, they can retake the government exam without any pressure. But in order to excel at Light of Love and succeed in life, they must learn to cooperate and participate in class and support the values and vision of LOL.

The local teachers were enthusiastic about the training and in spite of the heat wave and their age, they were open to change and eager to learn. Language was a barrier as the teachers don't speak English. Translating all the subject specific words into Burmese was a formidable task, as often one English word required several sentences in Burmese.

The six-day workshop always began with "ice breaker" activities which required active participation but also triggered a lot of laughter. Besides the main objective of changing the assessment system, the teachers were also shown how to plan lessons, implement teaching strategies and teaching aids. Zoe and Helen were proud of the teachers' performances, but they will need individual support, opportunities for guided practice and a mentor they can freely approach with any questions that arise when in the classroom.





The teachers with Helen and Zoe at the end of their first workshop

THANK YOU, HELEN for freely sharing your time and valuable knowledge with the teachers
and for your ongoing support and friendship!

Montessori Pre-School

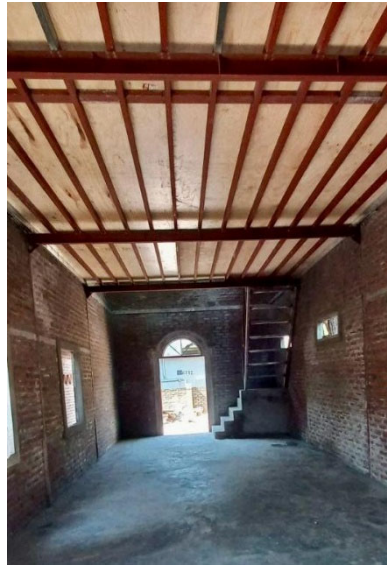
The Pre-School planning stage is nearly finished. There were many bureaucratic hurdles to be taken...

On 16 January, more than 10 officials came from the Chauk District Office to kind of look around and do a ground check before issuing a grant for the land. In Myanmar, the issuing of a land grant is prerequisite for everything else. The grant is required when applying for a construction permit or later when the building is finished, for applying for a school license. The group came in the morning but stayed so long that it was unavoidable to offer them lunch. But it brought the grant one step closer and finally, Zoe received it on 25 January.

With this matter settled, Zoe tackled the paperwork to apply for a construction permit. And a construction tax must also be paid – 1% of the estimated construction cost – not a small amount! Ground cleaning began in February and simultaneously, on the same property, the construction of a store room started (no permit necessary) Once the permit is issued, Zoe can order the building material and construction can begin. Estimated duration of construction is 8 months.



Construction of the store room begins...



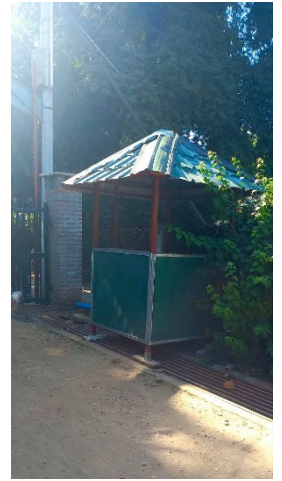
Nearing completion....

Architectural model of the planned pre-school



Bite size news...

- a new law requires the watchman to sit at the school entrance all day. To open and close the gate as needed – for security reasons. This little house is his shady guard post.
- In the last report I informed that the extension request for the school license was rejected. This was because the fire safety certificate was missing. The following fire protection measures were listed as mandatory, without which the certificate would not be issued and consequently, the school license not renewed:
 - ✓ fire extinguishers
 - ✓ smoke and heat detectors
 - ✓ sprinkler system
 - ✓ alarm system



It goes without saying, that fulfilling these requirements was an impossible assignment. Zoe missed two entire days of teaching because she had to deal with the bureaucracy. Finally, she wrote a statement to the government documenting all the buildings with photos and explaining that the requirements were totally unfeasible and completely unnecessary.

Meanwhile a new challenge has arrived: all private schools must now have a company license, as needed for every business. Another trip to the Magway Education office, more explaining that LOL is not a “for-profit business”, but a foundation. Zoe had to personally go to Magway with the foundation documents and again explain to the officers in charge. These officers then travelled to Nay Pyi Taw (a 3 hour plus drive) in order to present the documents to a higher authority. Meanwhile Zoe called the owners of the two other private schools in Yenangyaung and learnt that they both have company licenses. Light of Love is a unique case and the authorities are at a loss how to deal with the situation. Zoe is optimistic and says “in this case, no news is good news.”

- In January, the five Grade 12 students, studying for their final matriculation exam asked Zoe if they could move to and board at Light of Love so as to receive extra coaching to better prepare for the exam. Their teachers agreed that the extra training was required and so on 16 January the students moved to the top floor of the school. They needed coaching in physics, chemistry and maths. They sat for the final exams mid-March; results are expected in June. We are hopeful, that all five passed this difficult government exam!
- A new playground area (30 x 60 feet) is needed within the compound as classes are disturbed by the PE training. Construction is planned before the new school year commences, but because it requires the felling of several trees, it is another time-consuming matter.
- After three years break because of covid, the military coup and Zoe’s absence, maintenance work at Light of Love is being done during the summer break. Moe Min Kyaw, a graduate of the school, now attending Technical College in Yenangyaung is supervising the renovation and is assisted by five LOL students – 2 boys and 3 girls! Thank you!



Lei Thar Gone Guest House News

Again, as with LOL, the situation at the Guest House remains very challenging – the absence of guests, or otherwise said – the absence of income, the ever-present maintenance work, the constantly changing rules & regulations as well as frequent staff challenges, make life difficult. Besides these trials, Lyon is also involved in many tough situations involving property bought by Eric over the years. These matters require regular contact with government authorities and this interaction is mostly stressful, time consuming and always extremely frustrating.

- Lyon planned a “Shwe Set Thaw” package, offering a two-night stay at the Guest House and a visit to the very popular Pagoda Festival two hours’ drive away. Unfortunately, the conscription law put a stop to his plans as everyone is afraid to travel.
- A similar situation: Lyon was in Yangon in February when he received a summons from the Ministry of Hotel and Tourism Magway. A bicycle competition with various stops in Magway Division was planned, the prize money of 7 lakhs (approx. €300) was attractive, the junior minister of Magway would stay at Lei Thar Gone and this would be a great opportunity to promote the Magway region, they said. So, Lyon dropped his work in Yangon and left for Yenangyaung – five hours into the eight hour drive, he received a phone call: “the competition has been cancelled” – why? No entries - again everyone was afraid to go out because of the conscription law!
- Maintenance work was carried out: fencing around the property, road repairs between Light of Love and Lei Thar Gone, solar power facility, retaining walls, repairs and repainting of under-roofs in Rooms 7-14.
- Pool maintenance is always a challenge – frequent power cuts make running the pumps impossible (in Yenangyaung it’s currently 4 hours on, 4 hours off – unimaginable for us here in Europe) The price of chlorine has nearly doubled and a new law prohibits buying and transporting hydrochloric acid (used together with chlorine to keep the pool blue) because this in itself harmless substance is used for production of drugs such as heroin and methamphetamine! Failure to comply with the regulation means immediate arrest and imprisonment!
- 95 octane petrol costs are also a challenge – not only for the Guest House. Before the coup, petrol cost between 600/800 kyats per litre. Now the cost has soared to 2’820 kyats in Yangon and 2’970 kyats in Yenangyaung! But even the willingness to pay these prices doesn’t guarantee petrol, as there is a severe shortage in the entire country. Sometimes, Lyon even has to get up at 3am and wait in long queues for several hours, to buy a few gallons of petrol.
- The frequent power cuts are also a problem because obviously air conditioners stop running when the power is off. The current heat wave, with temperatures regularly hitting 43°C or even 46°C makes sleep without AC or at least a fan nearly impossible. Petrol costs limit the use of the generator. Running it, for example for 6 hours at night costs approx. 60’000 kyats and provides AC for 2 rooms plus lighting for the entire compound. Definitely not a good option, with an average room price of 50’000 kyats!

- Inflation is high and food prices have increased drastically. Lyon had the foresight to buy a year's supply of rice for the Guest House (10 x 50kg) and oil. Zoe also bought a year's supply for school meals as well as for the monthly rations (300 x 50kg)

In spite of all these challenges, there are positive moments:

- Lyon contacts the guests that did stay per Viber (messenger) and requests their feedback. This personal contact is very much appreciated and guests use the opportunity to inform him of small defects such as a broken door lock or shower tap. These feedbacks guarantee proper maintenance of the rooms.
- On 8 March Lyon attended the Tourism Development Forum 2024, Magway Region



Interesting contacts, important for Lyon's personal network, but in effect, given the current political circumstances, meeting content was mostly wishful thinking by the authorities

- From April 5 – 7 Lyon attended a 3-day class on organic gardening – a very rewarding experience! The Christian father who gave the course, leads a church, cares for poor children and is passionate about sharing his knowledge. His garden is in Mingaladon TS, 1 ¼ hrs. drive from Lyon's house. It was a chance to meet many people who love plants and nature, as Lyon himself does (and Eric certainly also did). The subject of the course was using compost as fertilizer. The course was useful as Lyon also learned about various grass types – one of which can grow up to 10 ft. into the ground. Very valuable for prophylactic erosion prevention – always an issue at LOL and LTG. The disadvantages of mono culture and the need for ecological balance were also topics of discussion.



Thank you, Lyon for your perseverance and positive, optimistic attitude, in spite of all challenges!

For those who are interested in a more in-depth view of the current situation, here a few links to relevant articles:

Forced conscription

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-steps-up-conscription-with-forced-abductions-after-thingyan.html>

New Year Message from Myanmar: Dictator Shows he is Forever Falling Short

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/new-year-message-from-myanmar-dictator-shows-he-is-forever-falling-short.html>

Young people attempt to flee ahead of conscription order

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-68345291>

Defeated Myanmar Junta Generals Given Death Sentences

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/defeated-myanmar-junta-generals-given-death-sentences.html>

This report was written by Therese, in collaboration with Zoe & Lyon