News
Religious Life



Rescuers work at the site of a damaged building in Mandalay, Myanmar, March 30, in the aftermath of a strong earthquake that struck two days earlier. People in Myanmar are in desperate need of humanitarian supplies and medical support as the death toll from the devastating earthquake that rocked central Myanmar continues to rise. (OSV News/Reuters)



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Women religious leaders and Catholic bishops in India have expressed solidarity with the people of earthquake-hit Myanmar and Thailand.

An earthquake measuring 7.7 on the Richter scale hit the two Southeast Asian countries on March 28, killing more than 2,700 in Myanmar and over 20 in Thailand. Thousands were injured and left homeless.

On March 31, the United States Geological Survey said the final death toll could cross 10,000.

Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Nirmalini, the president of the Conference of Religious India, told Global Sisters Report that she has been in touch with nuns in Myanmar and coordinating with the Hilton Foundation to extend their support.

Sr. Josy Mary, a Myanmar citizen and provincial of the Mother of Sorrows, Servants of Mary, said her sisters were living in "fear and anxiety" after their convents in Mandalay and Myint Nge were destroyed.



Sisters of the Mother of Sorrows, Servants of Mary spent the night outside their convent in Mandalay, Myanmar, which was destroyed in the massive earthquake on March 28. (Courtesy of Josy Mary)

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"Our sisters had to spend the night in the open like thousands of people in that region," she told Global Sisters Report over the phone.

Expressing "profound sorrow over the devastating earthquake" that led to "tragic loss of lives and widespread destruction," the Catholic Bishops' Conference of India expressed solidarity with the affected people.

Observing that the "scale of suffering and loss" is "truly heartbreaking," the bishops appealed to all citizens to pray for those suffering in the two countries.

Mary said several churches, Buddhist temples and mosques were fully or partially destroyed.

"Hundreds of people around our convents in the affected districts [were] killed," the Yangon-based nun said.



The partly damaged chapel of Mother of Sorrows convent is pictured in Mandalay, Myanmar, where only the crucifix survived the 7.7 magnitude earthquake. (Courtesy of Josy Mary)

She added that several Muslims at the Friday noon prayer were feared dead after a mosque near their Mandalay convent collapsed during the disaster.

Similarly, many Buddhist monks who were at a religious program were killed as their monastery was flattened in the earthquake, the provincial said, quoting her nuns in Mandalay.

"Our sisters escaped unhurt as they lived in a single-storied building and could easily come out of their convent, while people in apartments suffered more casualties," she added.

Her congregation mostly works in rural areas and is focused on the pastoral care of Catholics in parishes and social work, but she said her nuns have opted not to move to safer zones but stay and support those affected.

"We were raising funds to build a home for the aged, but now, our priorities are to rebuild our convents and support people who have lost everything," Mary added.



The front portion of the Mother of Sorrows convent in Mandalay, Myanmar, after the earthquake. (Courtesy of Josy Mary)

Salesian Fr. Bosco Zeya Aung, head of the Catholic Major Religious Superiors in Myanmar, said the religious joined the bishops' conference's relief and rehabilitation plans.

"An emergency meeting of bishops and major superiors [was] convened on April 1 to discuss disaster management by the church in Myanmar," the priest told GSR over the phone from Prague, where he is attending his congregation's general council.

He said the global Salesian community was also gathering resources to support the earthquake victims.

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Cardinal Charles Maung Bo, archbishop of Yangon, sought help from Catholics worldwide.

"I have appealed to all concerned for urgent humanitarian support and unimpeded access to the affected people. I have made an earnest appeal for the ceasefire by all the groups in hostility," the cardinal told Vatican News on March 29.

On March 29, India launched Operation Brahma to aid the earthquake victims. According to media reports, the country sent two naval ships and deployed an army field hospital with more than 100 medical personnel.