

Digest of local Covid-19 responses from Myanmar media #2

Part of an on-going L2GP research into community responses to Covid-19

By Kyaw Lin Htoon, Yangon, July 7, 2020

Stranded at sea or stuck at home - seafarers weather storm of uncertainty

As with seafarers in many countries, Myanmar's seafarers have faced hardships posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of them stranded at sea - others stuck at home.

On July 4, the [Frontier Myanmar magazine reported](#) that some 4,000 Myanmar seafarers are working on ships for longer than a year now and thus are entitled to be repatriated. COVID-19 travel restrictions though, have stranded thousands of these seafarers abroad - while thousands more are languishing at home eager but not able to return to work.

While some seafarers deal with being stranded far from home, their counterparts in Myanmar, as well as their unions and the employment services, are dealing with the harsh economic impact of the coronavirus. Being stranded at home without income is also taking a mental toll on some seafarers and the Myanmar Maritime Trade Unions' Federation (MMTUF) is offering them counselling via video calls.

Equally, U Thet Naing, an executive member of the MMTUF, told Myanmar Frontier that when seamen have been working on ships for more than eight months, most of them suffer homesickness. So, they talk with them to encourage positive thoughts. They also ask about their plans for the future and update them about improvements in efforts to control COVID-19 back home in Myanmar. Besides, he has also encouraged seafarer stuck for a long time on board their vessels to mediate.

Re-opening of airports and easing up of travel restrictions remains key to the ability of thousands of seafarers to return home after long stays on board and abroad. Easing up such restrictions is also what other thousands, currently stuck at home, are waiting for in order to resume their usual work and source of income. In preparation for a resumption of flights, the Myanmar Seamen's Federation has facilitated a COVID-19 testing program so that seafarers can provide documents, showing they are free of the virus.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the [Myanmar Seamen's Federation](#) (MSF) is also supporting basic household needs of elderly seamen in Yangon who can no longer work - as well as those who have become disabled by injuries sustained while working at sea. Such support include rice, edible oil, onion, fish tins, etc. distributed to hundreds of elderly and disabled former seamen every month since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis in March 2020.

On June 23th, MSF [organized a committee](#) to raise funds for building a special quarantine centre in Yangon for the seafarers who are going to come back from the overseas due to crew changes or because of the contracts have ended. Establishing the centre is expected to begin soon.

Relevant links:

<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/stranded-at-sea-stuck-at-home-seafarers-weather-storm-of-uncertainty/?fbclid=IwAR2iFX8nzIkJiQiaU8zLjzifJgdiaaqDoALMVZSP7zvtkO53Vqkg6UxyAFc>

https://www.facebook.com/MSFHO/?ref=br_rs

<https://www.facebook.com/kyawkyaw.latt>

The Ventilator

During the COVID-19 crisis, most of the countries around the world have faced with the trouble of insufficiency of ventilators. In a situation when countries like the U.S. experience such trouble, no surprise that this is a problem in Myanmar.

Prompted by this situation, local engineers, according to the [BBC World Service \(Myanmar\)](#), began inventing a prototype mini ventilator to be used in Intensive Care Units (ICUs) during the COVID-19 crisis. The names of that three Myanmar engineers are U Win Thein, U Ye Min and Ko Arkar Htet Kyaw. They also took advice from the professor-level anaesthetists.

They studied the structure ventilators theoretically, until they felt, they got it well. Their first prototype is based on a design made by American students. They aimed their prototype at patients in the early stages COVID-19's as they realised that their device would not be able to help those whose lungs have already been destroyed by the virus.

The ventilator is costed to around 1,000 USD and can be connected with a computer. One of the engineers, U Ye Min, explained to the BBC that “As our country is still poor, we know that it will be hard to buy the ventilators needed during a pandemic and as all the countries around the world are need to buy them. It is also an expensive medical device. In the situation when we have no ventilator, the healthcare staffs have to use air bag need to use your own hands and squeezing all the time to ventilate the patients. But it is hard for such a healthcare staff to do all the time.”

The engineers also explain that they have tried to create a ventilator, which is very portable so it could be put to use across the country – possible even during transport of patients to the few existing ICUs in Yangon and Mandalay. The prototype has been demonstrated to anaesthetists and work is continuing among other to better accommodate adjustment of minimum pressure and volume, max pressure and other variables. So, while yet not confirmed to be in use, the invention by the three engineers still stands out as an early example of how people in Myanmar rally to fight COVID-19 pandemic.

At that time when they came up with the prototype, Myanmar had only around 30 confirmed Covid cases and three persons were known to have died from the infection. According to government data updated on 6 July, Myanmar had seen a total of 316 confirmed cases - among them 245 people have recovered, and 6 persons died.

Relevant links:

<https://www.bbc.com/burmese/burma-52254592>

https://www.facebook.com/MinistryOfHealthAndSportsMyanmar/?ref=br_rs

<https://www.facebook.com/yeminhein/posts/10222817952103438>

Fighting mis/disinformation

The “People’s network to prevent and counteract the rumours about the Coronavirus” or in Burmese: “ကိုရိုနာဗိုင်းရပ်စ်ကောလာဟလတန်ပြန်တားဆီးရေးလူထုကွန်ရက်” is a Facebook group set up to fight mis- or disinformation about COVID-19. The group was started in March 12, 2020 and by now has more than 30.000 followers. The group is not run by any one person, NGO or a CSO. Rather, it is being maintained by “netizen volunteers” including researchers, ordinary people and some who do work with NGOs or CSOs – all coming together to use the power of community participation and crowdsourcing.

Many posts are about the outbreak of COVID-19 including fact-checking and of what is considered reliable sources of information. The group also share relevant government announcements and information about what is called “the COVID-19 Heroes” of Myanmar.

Such kind of social media group is meant to be helpful to ordinary people in Myanmar many of whom may not be so savvy or friendly with media as such – and in that sense it is very easy to spread mis- and disinformation in Myanmar society. Earlier examples of riots, violence and other undesirable situations triggered or spurred on by online mis/disinformation bears testimony to that.

As an example, a specific post in the category “COVID_19 Heroes” shared a post by Aung Kyaw Moe dated 27 March. The post said, “Healthcare servants, who have been denied [residence] by hostel owners can freely come and stay at my home.” Aung Kyaw Moe goes on to mention his phone number and address in Mandalay. The post was shared just a few days after Myanmar announced its very first COVID-19 patient on March 23th.

This Facebook group remains open for new members but as its posts are public anyone can make use of its services – even if you don’t want to join the group.

Relevant links:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/198360681431931/>

https://www.facebook.com/groups/198360681431931/post_tags/?post_tag_id=208383360429663

COVID-19's Music Men

We end this digest with a summary of [a story by the Frontier Myanmar](#) back in early May under the alluring headline: COVID-19's Music Men. You can read the full story in the magazine, here it suffices to explain that this impromptu “band” evolved as five men were hospitalized in the same room at the Okkalapa Maternal and Child Hospital, Yangon - having all tested positive for COVID-19.

During their stay together they created and recorded a number of songs describing their experience in the hospital: How they were being taken care of by the healthcare professionals, how they helped clean their own hospital room and toilets they use. These videos spread quickly online as they were picked up by local media outlets – including the video “Dude Covid - get out of here” - a sort of comedy in which, the five men dance to an Indian pop song and mime activities from their daily routines such as exercising, self-checking their vital signs and cleaning the corridor - while strumming the mops as if they were guitars.

All five men have long left the hospital having tested negative and free of any symptoms. But many people have felt relieved from the stresses and anxieties of the pandemic by watching them. Find links to the group's videos in the feed of Si Thu Wu's [Facebook account](#).

Relevant links:

<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/covid-19s-music-men/>

<https://www.facebook.com/sithuwu>

Find previous L2GP summaries of community and citizen responses to COVID-19 [here](#)

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<https://www.local2global.info>