News

Sr. Lucia Thandar Aung, superior of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Apparition convent in Mandalay, Myanmar, showed the severe damage of the building on May 3. A magnitude 7.7 earthquake struck Myanmar March 28. (John Zaw)

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On a recent sunny morning, Sr. Lucia Thandar Aung was busy managing the volunteers who helped move items from the damaged buildings and build a temporary shelter in the convent.

Most of the buildings, including a chapel in the big compound of the convent of the Sisters of the St. Joseph of the Apparition in Mandalay, the second largest city of this southeast Asian country, was severely damaged by the magnitude 7.7 earthquake that struck central Myanmar on March 28.

The convent's clean and quiet environment has turned into a messy situation with piles of aid such as drinking water bottles and food items. Mosquito nets and pillows are stacked in the nursery, which has been turned into a temporary residence.

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Sr. Thandar Aung, superior of Mandalay's convent where 10 nuns are currently staying, said she was not in Mandalay when the March 28 quake happened. She and other sisters were hosting psychosocial training in a Catholic village in Sagaing at the time.

"I was shocked and very sorrowful that all the nuns and boarding girls were sleeping on the concrete floor in the compound under the 40 degrees Celsius heat when I came back to the convent two days after the quake struck," Aung said with tears in her eyes.

She told Global Sisters Report that "no one had been injured and all the nuns including some elderly and the boarding girls managed to escape from the quake."

The sisters themselves went outside to search for drinking water as there was none in the compound. Three days after the quake struck, some elderly nuns were sent to the convent in nearby Pyin-Oo-Lwin.

"The challenge for us (the nuns) is taking a shower as we can't use the bathrooms in the damaged buildings," Aung said.

The compound's four damaged buildings have been labeled as unsafe by engineers, she said.

"We are yet to know how many days more will we have to sleep in the temporary shelter, pray in the damaged chapel and have meals in the damaged dining rooms," Aung said.

Sr. Natalina Apo, superior of the Sisters of Charity congregation in Mandalay, Myanmar, cleans the Marian grotto which is being used as a temporary residence for the nuns in the St. John Church's compound on May 3. (John Zaw)

The convent of the St. Joseph Sisters in nearby Amarapura was also severely damaged. At a residence for the elderly in nearby Zaw Gyi village, one nun was injured when a bathroom collapsed.

Despite hardships and being homeless, the St. Joseph Sisters have set up an emergency response team to reach out to the quake-affected areas.

The March 28 earthquake damaged seven Catholic churches in Mandalay, including the Sacred Heart Cathedral, whose bell tower was destroyed. The quake killed at least 3,800 people, with thousands more injured and thousands of structures destroyed or damaged.

Nearly 10,000 structures including 50 churches, over 5,000 Buddhist stupas and 3,800 monasteries have been destroyed and damaged according to a report by Radio Free Asia.

St. Joseph Sr. Regina Moe Moe Khaing, a member of the emergency team, said that the sisters have faced hardships and challenges but the suffering of the people, especially in remote areas, is more serious.

"What I see is we get the opportunity to reach out to the people who are most in need of our help," she said. "... We examine what they need and then prioritize providing their needs to avoid overlapping aids."

Mosquito nets are seen in the nursery school which are used for temporary residence for the nuns and some boarding girls in the St. Joseph sisters convent in Mandalay, Myanmar, on May 3, 2025. (John Zaw)

"As the quake has shaken the buildings and our daily routines, I feel it has also shaken our normal life and enabled us to get in touch with the people who are from various religions," Khaing said.

Khaing led the assessment by reaching out to the areas or villages in advance in order to help most effectively.

Khaing said she admires the spirit of the quake-affected people and their resilience amidst hardships, including collapsed houses and the need for shelter, food and

drinking water.With help from local donors and some church agencies such as Missio, the St. Joseph Sisters have provided food, non-food items, tents, tarpaulins and solar lights to people from quake- affected areas.

Sr. Natalina Apo, superior of the Sisters of Charity congregation in Mandalay, said the sisters became homeless after their building was damaged. The sisters took refuge in a Marian grotto at St. John's Church compound. The grotto sometimes floods, making it difficult to sleep in the temporary refuge.

"But I am not discouraged by the hardships and inconveniences and rather I thank God for giving me a chance to prioritize reaching out to the quake-affected areas and make a dialogue with other faiths," Apo said.

Sr. Natalina Apo, superior of the Sisters of Charity congregation in Mandalay, arranges aid such as cooking oil in the St. John church's compound in Mandalay, Myanmar, on May 3. With her are two volunteers. (John Zaw)

The nun has reached out to several villages, including Buddhist monasteries.

"I feel it is part of the evangelization and as part of an interfaith dialogue as I get a chance to talk with monks, nuns and people from various faiths," Apo said.

"While we were sitting in a Buddhist monastery, a man who regarded himself as the second leader from Pyusawhti (a pro-military militia group), came with the gun." Apo said.

The man, however, lowered his gun as the monk explained the Catholic sisters were coming to help quake victims.

"I had no fear and I feel it is a valuable experience for me as I am normally preoccupied with managing the nursery school, cooking and watering the plants in the community," Apo said.

The villages in Mingun township, where Apo visited are in a conflict area where the military and pro-military militia groups and the people's defense groups have been fighting.

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Sr. Marcinda Moe Moe is inspired by the willingness and fraternity of the Buddhist monks and nuns who are ready to help.

"Despite their monasteries and nunneries having been badly damaged, they show their willingness and offer to be ready to help distribute aid from the donors to the people," said Moe Moe, a Sister of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd in Mandalay.

Moe Moe, who is in charge of the vocation center in Mandalay, has slept in a one-story building along with two other nuns following damage to the vocation training center.

"We (the nuns) are now prioritizing the emergency needs of the people and later we will be conducting psychosocial support programs," Moe Moe said.