

Church helps Myanmar's struggling health system cope with COVID-19

YANGON, Myanmar (CNS) – The Catholic Church is lending a hand to people affected by the coronavirus in Myanmar as the country's health system struggles to cope with a record wave of COVID-19 infections.

Ucanews.com reported that St. Joseph's Catholic Major Seminary in Yangon has been converted into a care center and currently accommodates 50 people in serious condition, needing oxygen support. More beds are being arranged to accommodate 70 people in the seminary because more than 50 people have been on the waiting list, Church officials said.

Another 50 people have been admitted in the Epiphany Church compound in Yangon, while a seminary in Thanlyin, a port city near Yangon, is being converted into a care center.

More care centers are being opened in Catholic dioceses such as Myitkyina, Lashio and Taungngu, ucanews.com reported.

Karuna Myanmar, as the Catholic charitable aid agency Caritas is known, is coordinating with Medical Action Myanmar, a nongovernmental organization that provides medical care, including oxygen supplies, in Church-run care centers, Church officials said. All the care centers accept people regardless of race and religion.

Father Henry Eikhlein, executive coordinator of the Myanmar Catholic Church Humanitarian Assistance Initiatives, said the Church will prioritize conducting awareness programs, opening care centers and providing much-needed oxygen supplies. The organization was established by Cardinal Charles Bo of Yangon and other bishops along with priests, religious, medical

doctors and laypeople to respond to the pandemic.

The Church's initiative comes as the third wave devastates Myanmar, already on its knees after the military toppled the elected civilian leaders and seized power Feb. 1. The ensuing turmoil and protests have thrown the country's pandemic response into chaos.

The military junta-controlled Health Ministry has put the daily case load at an average of 6,000 and 200 deaths, but medics and charitable groups say the real figures are higher.

People have to line up for many hours for oxygen in several cities, while seriously ill patients die at home.

Cardinal Bo has appealed for those who rule to be "good shepherds" and save the people.

"These are apocalyptic times: starvation, struggle for oxygen, long queues in the cemeteries and the persisting virus of conflict and poverty of our people," he said in a homily July 25. "Unless there is peace, hundreds will be buried every day. Peace is the only vaccine against what is turning into an apocalypse of death and disease."

Father Robert Mg Ba of Kalay Diocese, which has transformed a pastoral center into a care center looking after 11 patients on oxygen support, said getting 24 hours of electricity was a big challenge.

"We have 30 beds and have even set up oxygen concentrators, but cannot admit more patients due to the electricity problem," Father Mg Ba told ucanews.com.

Kalay Diocese has 10 volunteers, including doctors, nurses and youths working to provide medical support to the patients. It also runs a clinic and COVID-19 testing facilities.