

The wonders that flow from water

Reporting by Katya Cengel

In 1962, the new military regime in Myanmar, then known as Burma, began expelling foreign aid workers and restricting the activities of charities. By 1979, the last two Rotary clubs in the Southeast Asian nation had disbanded, after 50 years of service.

For decades, Myanmar lingered in crumbling isolation, as many countries imposed economic sanctions and few tourists ventured there. Once ranked among the richest nations on the continent, the “Jewel of Asia” became the poorest.

Rotarians from Japan, Australia, New Zealand, and other countries continued to provide humanitarian aid, however. They’ve worked quietly behind the borders with Burmese partners, preserving good relations and a window to the outside world. Among them is J.T. Warring, of California, USA. On a side visit from Thailand, where he helped with tsunami relief, he learned that children at orphanages in Myanmar often contract diseases from contaminated drinking water, and that their daily ritual of carrying water from distant rivers and ponds leaves little time for education.

Warring launched an effort in 2005 that has provided 26 orphanages with sustainable water management systems, including the tower at the Aung Zayer Min Monastery. The systems, built with funding from The Rotary Foundation, supply clean water for drinking, cooking, washing, and irrigation.

Since Myanmar’s recent introduction of political and economic reforms, the tourists have returned to see Asia as it existed 50 years ago, with picturesque temples and rice paddies – and extreme poverty. International businesses are opening offices, as many nations, including the United States, have restored full diplomatic relations. After visiting the water systems, Kalyan Banerjee, 2011-12 RI president, announced that he would lead the effort to reintroduce Rotary, and its commitment to humanitarian service and peace, in Myanmar.

[Reprinted from the November 2012 issue of *The Rotarian*]