

Hello and welcome back. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Today we travel to Burma to hear how people are trying to save the past. Then we will talk about climate change and forest fires. They were a big problem for many parts of the world last year. Stay with us for "As It Is" ...a way to learn and improve your American English ...from VOA.

Changes in Burma's political life are giving Rangoon's historic area a new appearance. Very tall modern buildings are fast replacing buildings from colonial times. But business groups, historians and one of the country's last Jewish families are joining to preserve a 100-year-old synagogue. They want to keep the religious center as a historic part of the past of Burma, also known as Myanmar.

The Mesmuah Yeshua synagogue is in a neighborhood that was very common in colonial Rangoon. Mosques, Hindu temples, churches, and Buddhist pagodas share streets with markets, outdoor salesmen and hardware stores. The protected historic building dates back to 1896. A member of the Samuels family has cared for it over many years.

For the past 35 years, Moses Samuels has been the trustee --- the guardian -- of the synagogue. He inherited the responsibility from his father -- who followed his own father in the work. He looks forward to the time when his son takes the responsibility for the synagogue. Moses Samuels is hopeful about the future of the community.

Sammy Samuels is Moses Samuels' son. The younger Mr. Samuels recently returned to Myanmar after studying at a Jewish university in New York. He has celebrated all his major life events in the synagogue.

"It is the main reason we stick here. We could have closed. We could have moved to other countries. But it's very important to us. I used to play around here, I had my bar mitzvah here, I had my Shabbat dinner here, I had my wedding here."

For years, the building fell into disrepair. And, it lost its roof during a cyclone in 2008. The U.S. ASEAN Business Council donated money to keep the synagogue standing. But now the Samuels family is taking it over.

Mr. Samuels says tourism has increased in the country, helping the family's travel business, Myanmar Shalom. The business permits them to pay the cost of repairs.

Writer and historian Thant Myint-U heads the Yangon Heritage Trust. The organization has promised to save Rangoon's historic buildings. He says the synagogue's preservation effort involves more than just the building. Thant Myint-U says it means to recover Burma's past. The goal is to help people understand the city's rich history of differing ethnic groups.

“It’s also about revitalizing old Rangoon and old Yangon and revitalizing this in a way that helps all the people in this city, poor people, working class people, as well as middle class and other people, and help them both appreciate the multiculturalism here, but also help to engender and enable a new cosmopolitan Yangon to emerge in the 21st century as well.”

Moses Samuels agrees that having many different religious communities is important. He says he makes a point of having close personal relationships with other religious leaders in the city.

To show support of religious unity, Burma's government sent Aung Min to the event. He is the main peace negotiator for the ceasefires with armed groups in border areas.

“This is part of my intention to celebrate the culture and heritage of the Jewish community in Myanmar. We have longstanding Jewish culture and heritage here but we have less and less which is a sad thing to see so I came here in effort to celebrate that heritage. ”

As part of the synagogue's preservation plan, officials are planning to move the nearby Jewish cemetery. It has 700 burial places.

Rangoon's last rabbi left in the 1960's. Since then, no regular religious services have been held at the synagogue. But it remains open to the public.

Wildfires Were Bad News in 2013

Australia, Indonesia, Russia, Greece, and the United States ...those are just a few places where huge wildfires have been a problem in recent years. In the American West, for example, three wildfires caused major damage in 2013. Fire experts say most of these fires are a result of climate change, land use, and human actions. Steve Ember joins us with details.

June 2013: The Black Forest Fire destroys more than 500 homes in Colorado. Weeks later in Arizona, the Yarnell Hill fire kills 19 members of the Granite Mountain Hotshots -- a group known for its firefighting expertise. Then, in California, the Rim Fire becomes the third largest fire in state history.

Bill Kaage directs wildland fire operations for the United States Park Service at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. He says huge, costly wildfires were once rare.

“In the western United States, we have larger fires that occur over a larger period of time...”

Mr. Kaage says this change is forcing fire officials to change their methods.

United Nations officials and fire experts say long periods of dry weather are one reason for the fires. They suspect the lack of rainfall results from climate change.

Another suspected cause is land use, including years of protecting new communities in areas where fires were likely. The idea is to aggressively put out all wildfires. That policy is called suppression.

But Stephen Pyne of Arizona State University does not believe the suppression method is successful. He says it has failed in every country likely to have wildfires.

“(When) the smoke is on the horizon, and the TV cameras are out, it seems like an easy solution to call in the troops, bring in the airplanes and the helicopters, bomb it away, and then the problem is gone. All we’ve done is put it off.”

“Turn on your emergency lights...”

Stephen Pyne says suppression is a temporary measure that creates more dangerous fires later. It enables smaller trees and plants to build up. This vegetation acts as fuel that can carry fire to taller treetops.

“We have a burn-out going on the south side...”

Oregon forester Marc Barnes says that when fires burned at low intensity in the past, it would clean the forest. Now, he says, fires are burning at high intensity and destroying all the trees and the forest.

He says money for fire-fighting should be spent on preventive measures like fuel reduction.

“Otherwise, we’re just going to keep having bigger and bigger fires. We’re going to spend more and more and a lot less is going to get done by those agencies.”

He adds that “so much of their budgets are getting eclipsed by the budgets for fire suppression.”

Bill Kaage says the federal deficit has forced agencies like his to cut their budgets for fuel reduction.

“There’s a choice we’ve had to make to make sure we have the engines and the crews available to us for a response.”

The United States Congress has demanded a national plan of action to fight wildfires. Stephen Pyne says the move is, in his words “bold but underfunded.”

Thank you, Steve. I’m Jim Tedder in Washington. More Learning English programs are headed your way, and there is world news at the beginning of the hour.