

Myanmar (Union of) (Myanma Naingngandaw) (Burma)

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Location and area

Myanmar is a republic in South East Asia, bordered on the north by China, on the east by China, Laos, and Thailand, on the south by the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal, and on the west by the Bay of Bengal, Bangladesh, and India. The total area of the country is 676,552 km²

Topography

A horseshoe-shaped mountain complex and the valley of the Irrawaddy river system are the dominant topographical features of Myanmar. The mountains of the northern margin rise to 5,881 m (Hkakabo Razi, the highest peak in southeastern Asia). The two other mountain systems have north-south axes. The Arakan Range, with peaks reaching more than 2,700 m, forms a barrier between Myanmar and India. The Bilaukaung range, the southern extension of the Shan Plateau, lies along the boundary between southwestern Thailand and southeastern Lower Myanmar. The Shan Plateau, originating in China, has an average elevation of about 910 m.

Generally narrow and elongated in the interior, the central lowlands attain a width of about 320 km across the Irrawaddy-Sittang delta. The deltaic plains, extremely fertile and economically the most important section of the country, cover an area of about 46,600 km².

Climate

Myanmar has three seasons: a hot and wet season from mid-May to October, a cooler season from late October to mid-February, and a very hot season from mid-February to early May. During the hot-wet season, the period of the South-West Monsoon, rains usually fall every day and sometimes all day, bringing almost all the annual average of about 5,100 mm of rain to Lower Myanmar and about 750 mm to Upper Myanmar, while temperatures average around 29° in Mandalay and 27° C in Rangoon. In the cooler season, January temperatures average around 20° C in Mandalay and 25° C in Rangoon. By the end of the hot season, average temperatures have risen to over 38° C in many parts of Myanmar. Temperatures are generally lower in mountainous regions.

Land use

Forests and woodland cover about half of Myanmar. In the regions of maximum precipitation, the dense tropical forests contain extensive stands of timber and oil-bearing trees, including commercially valuable teak forests.

About 15 per cent of the total land surface of Myanmar is suitable for farming. The richest soils are found in a narrow alluvial strip along the Bay of Bengal, where mountain streams irrigate the land, in the wide river valleys, and in the alluvial deposits of the Irrawaddy delta and valley. These deep deposits form a vast, fertile belt especially suitable for rice cultivation because of the abundant moisture. The country is one of the leading rice producers in the world (Microsoft Encarta Encyclopedia 2002).

Wetlands

Lappalainen & Żurek (1996b) mention a wetland area („mostly wetlands“) of 9,650 km². This seems to be a low value, as only the Irrawaddy freshwater swamp forests are reported to be 15,200 km² (www.worldwildlife.org/wildworld/profiles/terrestrial/im/im0116_full.html) and the Myanmar Coast mangroves 21,300 km² (www.worldwildlife.org/wildworld/profiles/terrestrial/im/im1404_full.html)

Peatlands

Kivinen & Pakarinen (1980) estimate the peatland area (> 30 cm peat) in Birma as being 500 km². Also Markov et al. (1988) present this figure for the area of „peat resources“ (peat thickness not mentioned). According to them, the peat thickness is 1-2 m, and the deposits contain 100 Mtonnes of peat.

According to the interpreted World Soil Map (Van Engelen & Huting 2002) 3,410 km² of histosols exist in Myanmar and 62,947 km² of gley soils.

Mire and peatland losses

According to Geoanalytics (www.geoanalytics.com/bims/bm.htm) freshwater swamps originally (i.e. before the influence of humans) covered 16,076 km² against currently 572 km². Mangroves originally covered 16,616 km² against currently 4,219 km². Most of the mangroves have been cut for firewood and cleared for rice paddies (<http://wcs.org/home/18/570/2688>).